

AFC QUARTERLY

THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE OF THE ASIAN FOOTBALL CONFEDERATION

ISSUE 2

KEISUKE HONDA

CSKA Moscow star
driving Japan towards
FIFA World Cup finals

ISSUE
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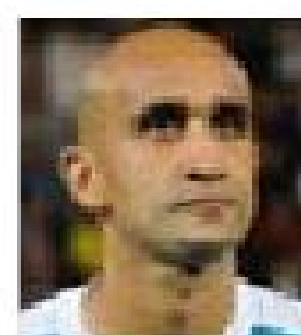
AUSTRALIA 2015

Sydney
selected to host
showpiece final



PLUS SINGAPORE

ASEAN champions
look to the future
after regional
success



ZESH REHMAN

England-born Pakistan international leads by example in South Asia and for Hong Kong's Kitchee



JONG TAE-SE

DPR Korea star returns to Asia determined to make a splash in the ACL with Suwon Bluewings



OMAR ABDULRAHMAN

With a Gulf Cup winners' medal to his name and an appearance at last year's Olympic Games, what's next for the exciting UAE midfielder?



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Zhang Jilong

AFC Acting President
FIFA Executive Committee Member



Dato' Alex Soosay

AFC General Secretary



Dear friends,

Welcome to the second edition of the AFC Quarterly featuring once again a round-up of the confederation's important activities, both on and off the pitch, as well as introducing the individuals and organisations that play such a key role in making Asian football a force to be reckoned with on the global stage.

The constant improvements that have been made within our region are possible only because of the intense efforts and cooperation at Member Association and confederation levels aimed at raising the profile of the game. In this direction, there will be several initiatives throughout this year as the 2013 AFC Grassroots Year puts the focus on this crucial aspect of development.

Also related to development was the historic renewal of an agreement with the German Football Federation that will continue the partnership between the two bodies in the technical and management areas, providing AFC's Member Associations with the latest knowhow.

In addition, AFC's development programme Kick Off has been rolled out and is generating a lot of interest from the Member Associations who are keen to use it to professionalise their game.

The AFC is committed to the fight against match-fixing and corruption and to underline that stance we jointly hosted a conference: 'The ugly side of the beautiful game' with the Interpol and FIFA to educate and train our Member Associations on ways and measures to combat this menace.

AFC has a proud tradition of democracy and this will be showcased again in the month of May when the Member Associations convene in our Congress over two days in Kuala Lumpur.

We hope you enjoy reading this edition.

Zhang Jilong
AFC Acting President

Dato' Alex Soosay
AFC General Secretary

Gallery



Jordan Delight

Coach Adnan Hamed is thrown in to the air by his players as the Jordan national team celebrate their historic 2-1 win over AFC Asian Cup holders Japan in March's round of FIFA World Cup qualifying matches in Amman.

Gallery

Eye-Catching Debut

Tractorsazi Tabriz underlined their reputation for being amongst the most passionate fans of any Iranian club after a crowd of 69,839 saw Antonio Oliveira's side mark their AFC Champions League debut with an impressive 3-1 win over UAE President's Cup winners Al Jazira at Yadegar Emam Stadium at the end of February.

Gallery



Damjanovic Makes His Mark

Having topped the scoring charts in 2012 with an impressive 31 goals to become just the third foreign player to be named K-League MVP, Montenegro international Dejan Damjanovic scored twice as domestic champions FC Seoul underlined their AFC Champions League credentials with a 5-1 win over China's Jiangsu Sainty on Matchday One at the end of February.



AFC Asian Cup Venues & Schedule Unveiled

MELBOURNE, SYDNEY, BRISBANE, CANBERRA AND NEWCASTLE
CONFIRMED AS HOST VENUES FOR THE NEXT AFC ASIAN CUP,
WHICH WILL TAKE PLACE IN AUSTRALIA AT THE START OF 2015

Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane, Canberra and Newcastle have been named as the venues for the 2015 AFC Asian Cup, while the match schedule has also been announced.

Melbourne Rectangular Stadium will host the opening ceremony as well as Australia's first match of the tournament on Friday 9 January, with the continental showpiece culminating at the 84,000 capacity Stadium Australia in Sydney on Saturday 31 January.

Brisbane Stadium, Canberra Stadium and Newcastle Stadium will also host games during the three-week 16-team tournament.

"The announcement of the five competition venues and the schedule of matches is a significant milestone for any event," said AFC Asian Cup 2015 Organising Committee Chairman HRH Prince Abdullah ibni Sultan Ahmad Shah.

"The AFC is very impressed with the standard of facilities in Australia and we look forward to seeing the best football Asia has to offer being played out on the pitches.

"From the opening game in Melbourne to the final in Sydney and the important games in Brisbane, Canberra and Newcastle, we are pleased football fans from different regions will get to see all of the best teams. I am sure the AFC Asian Cup 2015 will have a tremendous impact in Australia and help to further grow football."

Sydney and Brisbane will hosts Australia's two remaining games in the group stage, while one of the semi-finals will be played at Stadium Australia on Australia Day – Monday 26 January.

As well as hosting the opening ceremony, the 30,000 capacity Melbourne Rectangular Stadium will also host a quarter-final.

The 52,500 capacity Brisbane Stadium and the 25,500 capacity Canberra Stadium will host seven matches in total including a

quarter-final each, while the 33,000 capacity Newcastle Stadium will host a semi-final as well as the third place play-off.

"With about 650 days to go until the kick-off of AFC Asian Cup Australia 2015, it is exciting to be ticking off two major milestones – announcing our venues and match schedule," said AFC Asian Cup Australia 2015 Local Organising Committee Chairman Frank Lowy.

"These two critical parts of the picture will allow the Local Organising Committee to do the detailed planning required to make the Asian Cup in Australia a truly world-class event."

Reigning Asian champions Japan, hosts Australia as well as Korea Republic and DPR Korea have already qualified for the 2015 AFC Asian Cup, while the ongoing preliminary tournament will finish in March next year.

For more on the AFC Asian Cup Australia 2015 turn to page 58.



Jordan Claim Historic Win To Deny Japan

ADNAN HAMAD'S JORDAN BEAT JAPAN AS ASIAN CHAMPIONS MISS
OUT ON SECURING EARLY QUALIFICATION FOR BRAZIL 2014

Japan will have to wait until June to know if the Asian champions will secure a fifth consecutive appearance at the 2014 FIFA World Cup after Jordan claimed arguably the biggest win in their history at the end of March.

With Japan needing just a point at King Abdullah International Stadium in Amman after Australia were held to a 2-2 draw at home by Oman earlier on Matchday Seven of the final round, Khalil Ateyah and Ahmad Ibrahim scored as Jordan secured a 2-1 win to significantly boost their chances of a maiden FIFA World Cup appearance in Brazil next year.

Japan did have a chance to secure the point they needed to qualify with two games to spare, but after Manchester United midfielder Shinji Kagawa had pulled one back for the

visitors midway through the second half, Yasuhiro Endo missed a penalty two minutes later.

"We played well, controlled the game and created many chances but we were unlucky and we couldn't score except for the once," said Japan coach Alberto Zaccheroni.

"Jordan were lucky and they scored two goals from the few chances that they had in the game.

"Our opponents did not change from the previous match except that their defence became better and they were strong. We missed a chance to qualify and we must wait for the next match to confirm our qualification."

The win lifted Jordan up to second place in Group B and means Adnan Hamad's side have beaten both 2011 AFC Asian Cup finalists at home during the final round

having edged out Australia by the same scoreline in September.

And having suffered a 6-0 defeat by Japan at Saitama Stadium earlier in the final round, the win also allowed Jordan to gain revenge for the penalty shootout defeat by the Blue Samurai in the quarter-finals of the 2004 AFC Asian Cup.

"We had a great game and the players followed our instructions," said Hamad.

"This win was a sweet revenge for us after the defeat that we had in the opening match against Japan in this round.

"The three points give us a big push to fight for a ticket to the World Cup. The previous stage was very hard and we should expect things to be harder in the next matches. We must focus and get at least four points. This was a historic win for Jordanian football."



Nominations For AFC Elections Announced

Four candidates have been nominated for the role of AFC President ahead of May's Congress in Kuala Lumpur. Thailand's Dato' Worawi Makudi, Saudi Arabia's Dr. Hafez Ibrahim Al Medlej, Bahrain's Sheikh Salman Bin Ibrahim Al Khalifa and Yousuf Al Serkal from the United Arab Emirates have been nominated to succeed AFC Acting President Zhang Jilong for a two-year term, running until 2015.

"We will have to work towards making the year 2013 memorable for Asian football," said out-going AFC Acting President Zhang.

"Our teams and administrators made us proud in 2012 and I am confident that we will better that mark this year," Zhang said in the AFC statement.

"We have many events lined up in 2013 and we, as guardians of AFC and Asian football, must make sure that the continent scales newer heights each year."

Meanwhile, Qatar's Hassan Al Thawadi and Bahrain's Sheikh Salman Bin Ibrahim Al Khalifa have also been nominated for the

role of FIFA Executive Committee Member from 2013 to 2017.

Australia's Moya Dodd has been nominated for the role of Female AFC Vice-President.

Dodd will retain the position she has held since 2009 unopposed.

Dodd, along with Han Un-gyong from DPR Korea and Palestine's Susan Shalabi Molano, is also one of a trio who has been nominated to stand for two positions on the AFC Executive Committee Members for a term that runs from 2013 to 2015.

The nominations will be scrutinised and the list of candidates will be sent to the Member Associations a month prior to the Congress in accordance with the AFC Statutes.

The Electoral Congress of the confederation will take place on May 2, with the Ordinary Congress taking place a day later.

The Ordinary Congress will convene to carry out the statutory business, including the presentation of Standing Committees and the General Secretary's reports and amendments to the Statutes.

ELECTION CANDIDATES

AFC President (2013-2015)

Dato' Worawi Makudi (Thailand)
Dr. Hafez Ibrahim Al Medlej (Saudi Arabia)
Sheikh Salman Bin Ibrahim Al Khalifa (Bahrain)
Yousuf Al Serkal (UAE)

FIFA Executive Committee Member (2013-2017)

Hassan Al Thawadi (Qatar)
Sheikh Salman Bin Ibrahim Al Khalifa (Bahrain)

Female AFC Vice-President (2013-2015)

Moya Dodd (Australia)

Female AFC Executive Committee Members x2 (2013-2015)

Han Un-gyong (DPR Korea)
Moya Dodd (Australia)
Susan Shalabi Molano (Palestine)

Interpol Conference Addresses Match-Fixing

Representatives from law enforcement agencies and the betting industry met AFC Member Associations in Kuala Lumpur in February for Interpol's 'Match fixing: The Ugly Side of the Beautiful Game' conference.

The conference was organised by Interpol's Integrity in Sport unit, as part of the joint Interpol/FIFA Training, Education and Prevention initiative, and in partnership with the Asian Football Confederation and the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission.

With 200 participants attending over the two days, the conference was aimed at identifying the tactics used by organised crime networks while also looking at ways to increase prevention efforts.

"We need to admit that match-fixing is a real danger to football's ethical values and needs to be eliminated to preserve the sanctity of the sport," AFC Acting President Zhang Jilong told delegates.

"Your participation in this conference proves that we are ready to work hand-in-hand to eradicate this cancer from the game. Match-fixing is too complex and widespread for one organisation to fight it alone. To fight this, we need a joint and coordinated effort."

High on the conference agenda was looking at current and anticipated future trends in match-fixing and irregular and illegal betting, while also looking at the adverse influence of the Asian



betting markets and organised crime on football.

"We look forward to embracing our 47 Member Associations in a very special way by eradicating all negative elements which has plagued our beautiful game in recent years," said AFC General Secretary Dato' Alex Soosay.

"AFC will pledge to continue working along with Interpol to deliver a series of training, education and prevention workshops in 2013 and 2014 at both regional and national levels."

"I would also like to highlight to all our Member Associations of their statutory obligation as it is your responsibility to fight match-fixing and corruption."

The identification of current good practice, ways of enhancing good governance and the importance of protecting players and initiatives in training, education, prevention and investigation were also key issues be discussed.

"Criminals can make millions in illicit profits from match-fixing with little risk of being detected and will exploit every opportunity," said Interpol's Director of Capacity Building and Training Dale Sheehan.

"By bringing together partners we are raising awareness and understanding of the problem."

"Sports and fair play are the very fabric of our society and youth and the impact of match-fixing, including murder, suicide, assault and threats has the ability to undermine that very fabric."



TRUE BELIEVER

KEISUKE HONDA'S PERFORMANCES IN QATAR STEERED JAPAN TO A RECORD FOURTH AFC ASIAN CUP IN 2011, AND NOW THE CSKA MOSCOW MAN IS ON THE VERGE OF ENSURING THE BLUE SAMURAI QUALIFY FOR A FIFTH STRAIGHT FIFA WORLD CUP FINALS. AND THIS TIME, HE HAS HIS SIGHTS SET ON MAKING HIS MARK ON THE BIGGEST STAGE OF ALL.

Photos: World Sport Group



If there is one character trait Keisuke Honda does not lack, it is self-belief. To witness the way he carries himself on and off the field, the air of authority and assuredness brings to mind that of someone with supreme self-confidence.

His aura is reminiscent of that worn by another of Japan's recent football heroes: two-time Asian Player of the Year, Hidetoshi Nakata.

Like Nakata, Honda is central to

everything that happens on the field for Japan, and to highlight the fact he wears a hairstyle so distinctive there is little doubt who is doing what. Wearing a head of peroxide blond hair makes it impossible to hide in the world of Asian football, and Honda — just like Nakata before him — is not the type to seek out the darkest recesses of the field.

Off the field, too, he is prepared to make bold pronouncements. While many of his peers pump out the usual





bland "I will do my best" platitudes, Honda often has something more substantial to say.

So when the 26-year-old – he turns 27 on June 13 – CSKA Moscow man declares his desire to win the FIFA World Cup in Brazil in 2014, it comes as little surprise. It's not that this is an outlandish claim, but more that it speaks of the confidence Honda has in himself and his team-mates. And he's not prepared to hide his feelings behind a wall of media speak and false modesty.

"I think we have a chance to win the World Cup in 2014 because many countries think it will be easy against Japan," says Honda. "This is an advantage for us. I hope Japan will surprise the world and I always believe in my national team. If we can believe, we can do everything."

Honda's hopes may sound fanciful, but it is easy to forget just how close Japan came to upsetting the established order in South Africa in 2010, when Honda emerged as the star of the show for a Japan side that went to the FIFA World Cup with few expectations.

The preparations for the tournament – Japan's fourth World Cup in a row – had been dismal. Coach Takeshi Okada was under pressure to resign and few expected Japan to do anything other than lose all three group games and come home with their tails between their legs.

Instead, with Honda operating at the sharp end of the team's attack – he was nominally a forward but operated more as an advanced midfielder – Japan's campaign began with a 1-0 win over Cameroon, with Honda claiming the only goal.

Defeat at the hands of the Netherlands was followed by a comprehensive 3-1 win over Denmark, arguably Japan's best ever performance at the FIFA World Cup. Honda was the star of the show, opening the scoring with a spearing, dipping free kick that gave Thomas Sorenson little chance.

The win took the Japanese into the knockout phase of the tournament for the first time on foreign soil and into a meeting with Paraguay. What should have been a fine opportunity to reach the quarter-finals for the first time, however, perished in a poor game that saw Japan eliminated on penalties after a dull 0-0 draw. Within seven months – and with Alberto Zaccheroni having taken over as head coach from Okada – Japan were claiming the AFC

"I THINK WE HAVE A CHANCE TO WIN THE WORLD CUP IN 2014 BECAUSE MANY COUNTRIES THINK IT WILL BE EASY AGAINST JAPAN."

Asian Cup for a record fourth time, with Honda the tournament's Most Valuable Player, underlining the status of Japan and Honda as the continent's leading lights.

"I don't think I contributed to the team something special," he says, somewhat modestly of his performance, which saw him lead the team throughout all three weeks in Qatar and culminated in victory over Australia at Doha's Khalifa Stadium.

"We were expected to do well in the Asian Cup as we had a good World Cup in 2010, so we were under pressure and we started slowly.

"But after our slow start the team started to play well and not for me, everybody contributed, I didn't contribute anything special, everybody gave to each other.

"It was great to win the award and the Asian Cup and to be recognised for playing well, but for me the individual award doesn't matter. For me, the Asian Cup was the most important award. I was happy and the team were happy, that's most important."

Japan's win underlined their status as Asia's number one, but it is not merely their position as the continent's leading team that has Honda confident the Japanese can succeed against the world's best. Rather, it is that the likes of Shinji Kagawa, Yuto Nagatomo and others – including himself –

are regularly proving themselves at some of the game's greatest clubs.

"We have good talents at this moment in the Japanese national team, there are many talented players," he says. "Some players play in Germany and we have one player playing in Manchester United and one at Inter Milan, so if we played well at the World Cup I think we can (do well).

"Of course, we need to cooperate with each other. We should help each other, but at first we have to believe in ourselves. Without belief we can't do anything, so I really believe in my team-mates."

Honda's own club career has gone through a steady upward trajectory. He joined Nagoya Grampus from high school after impressing for Seiryō High School at Japan's national high school championship, spending three years at the club before signing for Dutch side VVV Venlo at the start of 2008.

"I played for Nagoya for three years after high school," says Honda. "At the time, Nagoya finished mid-table most seasons, but it was a great time for me as I grew a lot. It gave me the opportunity to go to Europe. So it's a fantastic time for me."

"My time in the Netherlands was fantastic. The first six months we didn't play well and the team got relegated. But the second season, we played very well and were

Left Keisuke Honda was a key component in Japan's AFC Asian Cup win in Qatar in 2011.

Right Honda has carried his impressive form into Japan's attempt to qualify for the finals of the FIFA World Cup in Brazil in 2014.

"IT WAS GREAT TO WIN THE AWARD AND THE ASIAN CUP AND TO BE RECOGNISED FOR PLAYING WELL, BUT FOR ME THE INDIVIDUAL AWARD DOESN'T MATTER. FOR ME, THE ASIAN CUP WAS THE MOST IMPORTANT AWARD."

promoted as champions.

"Of course I didn't expect to play in the second division when I signed for the club, but this time was the most important for my career because during that season I improved a lot."

Honda's stint in the Netherlands lasted barely two years before he was on his travels again. After impressing for both Venlo and Japan – having made his debut against Bahrain in qualifying for the FIFA World Cup in June 2008 – he was high on the wanted list of numerous clubs across Europe.

His destination, though, was a surprise, although for Honda the decision to move to

CSKA Moscow was straightforward.

"I had the opportunity to play for CSKA so it was not a difficult decision," he says. "As I knew CSKA played in the UEFA Champions League and they play well. Yeah, so I decided immediately when I knew they had made an offer."

"When I went to Russia, my life changed once again by coming to Moscow because it is so different to VVV. The fans expected CSKA to perform well in the game. You know, at my previous clubs I didn't feel this pressure from the supporters. But it is great for me."

Both moves have presented Honda with significant differences to the life he led in Japan and, even now, he encounters challenges on a daily basis.

"I needed to communicate with the other players and I needed to learn English so I could speak to my team-mates," he says. "Holland is totally different to Japan, and the food was unfamiliar. On the pitch I have confidence with my football skills but I had to adapt to the different food and culture. Luckily, everyone was very nice to me, so it was not so difficult to adjust."

"I changed everything, moving from Japan to the Netherlands and from the Netherlands to Russia, both ways you know. I had to adjust quickly and I made a good result."



Left In action against Oman during his recent FIFA World Cup qualifiers.

Above Honda celebrates with his team-mates in Moscow.

Bottom Right Honda's hat-trick against Jordan gave Japan's Brazil 2014 campaign a major boost.

"I HAD TO ADJUST QUICKLY AND I MADE A GOOD RESULT. PEOPLE ALWAYS HELPED ME, BUT I HAD TO SPEND TIME TO ADJUST."

People always helped me, but I had to spend time to adjust.

"It's difficult, because football is football, but I think on the pitch it is the same but off the pitch the supporters are different. All of the stadiums have a great atmosphere; it doesn't matter if it's a weekday or the weekend.

"I had to learn English because I want to be able to speak to the other players directly and at the moment (only) half of the CSKA squad can speak English, so it is difficult to communicate with them. On the pitch it's much easier for me, but the hardest part is the communication."

Honda's career in Moscow has seen highs and lows, from scoring in the UEFA Champions League against Sevilla with a devastating free-kick to missing more than half the season with a knee injury in 2011.

Yet it says much about the former Nagoya midfielder that he continues to battle onward and has set his sights on greater achievements, including further success in the UEFA Champions League and making a real mark at the FIFA World Cup.

"It's in my character, I think, that I don't want to give up," says Honda. "You know, for example, last year I had a knee injury that kept me out for five months but I always think positively."

"I noticed that I could use the time to build up my body in my other areas so I still trained everyday but focused on areas that I couldn't work on when I was playing. That's what I noticed things that, without the injury, I would not have noticed. So something good can happen always. I always try to think positively, you know, that's my philosophy."

"I am very determined, I always think positive and I never give up and I think the most important thing's the philosophy, the philosophy you know. My philosophy is to never give up and work hard everyday, then I can be success. I believe in my philosophy."

"I have many big ambitions I've still not reached, so I'm still hungry. I have many dreams. In my football career, my dream is to win the Champions League and the World Cup with Japan. This is really what I want. And, as for after my playing days, we will have to wait and see."



Keisuke Honda

Nationality: Japan
 DOB: 13/06/1986
 Position: Midfielder
 Current club:
 CSKA Moscow (Russia)
 Previous clubs:
 Nagoya Grampus (Japan)
 VVV Venlo (Netherlands)
 Honours:
 AFC Asian Cup 2011; Russian Cup 2010/11
 Awards:
 AFC Asian Cup 2011 Most Valuable Player;
 Japan Player of the Year 2010

MAN ON A MISSION

SELF-PROCLAIMED AMBASSADOR JONG TAE-SE IS HOPING HIS MUCH-HERALDED RETURN TO ASIA CAN NOT ONLY REVITALISE THE DPR KOREA INTERNATIONAL'S CAREER, BUT ALSO PLAY A SMALL ROLE IN UNITING THE DIVIDED KOREAN PENINSULA.

By Andrew Mullen • Photos: World Sport Group

Born and educated in Japan to a father from Korea, Republic and a mother from DPR Korea, Jong Tae-se's meteoric rise – which culminated in an appearance at the 2010 FIFA World Cup – has been widely reported.

Now the 29-year-old is hoping to write a new chapter after ending an admittedly underwhelming two-year spell in Germany by joining K-League Classic side Suwon Bluewings ahead of the 2013 season.

Jong became only the fourth player who has represented DPR Korea to play in the Korean top-flight when he helped Suwon open their 2013 domestic campaign with a 2-1 win over Seongnam Ilhwa Chunma, having earlier made his debut against Australia's Central Coast Mariners in the AFC Champions League.

He had previously played in the AFC Champions League on three occasions and helped Kawasaki reach the quarter-finals twice before moving to Germany, first with VfL Bochum before switching to FC Köln.

"My performance last season wasn't the best; therefore I decided to come back to where I started. Also, it is a valuable chance for me to become a part of a South Korean team," said Jong.

"As you may know, there is a political tension between the South and North and I hope I can contribute in cutting down the existing tension. Isn't it fascinating how sports can unite two countries?"

Having become the first professional footballer to graduate from his college, Jong – or Chong Tese as his name is spelt in Japan – adapted to life at the top level quickly and soon made a name for himself with Kawasaki Frontale.

His DPR Korea debut was equally impressive as Jong scored four goals against Mongolia in a qualifier for the

2008 East Asian Championship before adding four more against Macau.

And in the tournament proper in February 2008, Jong's stock continued to rise as the robust striker scored against both Japan and Korea.

"I wasn't surprised with my success. Although I went through many hardships, I overcame it with my coaches and fellow players, effort and also some luck," he added.

"When I was young my mother sent me to the pro-North Korean residents' league school in Japan, where I was educated as a North Korean. That is why I did not hesitate to be a part of the DPR Korea national team.

"In the East Asian Championship I was able to score against Korea and Japan. I cannot deny this was a big part of my career."

The best, though, was yet to come as Jong helped DPR Korea qualify for the FIFA World Cup for the first time since the country's memorable run to the quarter-finals in 1966.

And Jong's tearful reaction to the national anthem ahead of the opening game against Brazil in Johannesburg became an iconic image in South Africa.

"The 2010 World Cup put me at the centre of the media interest. However, I was depressed at the results," said Jong, who had spent time on trial in England with Blackburn Rovers at the start of 2010.

"One thing I've learned from the World Cup was the importance of playing in a big league. I was not even close to the players who played in the big leagues. They were very confident in their play, while I was very aggressive and emotional. To appear at the World Cup was impressive but I was short in ability."

After losses to Brazil, Portugal and the Ivory Coast ended DPR Korea's

tournament in the group stage, Jong's chance to test himself at a higher level soon arrived as he joined Bochum after the tournament.

"There was an offer before the World Cup from Germany, but I had concerns when to sign the contract," said Jong, who provided the assist for Ji Yun-nam to score DPR Korea's consolation in the 2-1 defeat by Brazil in South Africa.

"Finally, I decided to sign before the World Cup. However, after the match against Brazil, offers came in from England but they were too late."

From the highs of South Africa, though, a group stage exit at the 2011 AFC Asian Cup brought huge disappointment as DPR Korea could only manage a draw against the United Arab Emirates before losing to Iran and Iraq.

"I was dissatisfied as I couldn't score," said Jong. "I had joined the team two days before the first match so I couldn't move freely. This affected my play in the Bundesliga and later on, it affected my career in Germany."

Further disappointment followed as DPR Korea failed to reach the final round of qualifiers for the 2014 FIFA World Cup in Brazil after finishing third behind Uzbekistan and Japan.

"I was very disappointed we were unable to qualify for the 2014 World Cup. As we were in same group as Japan and Uzbekistan, everything was hard for us," said Jong.

"But we are now looking at both the 2015 Asian Cup in Australia and also the 2018 World Cup."

DPR Korea have already secured their place at the next edition of the AFC Asian Cup after winning the 2012 AFC Challenge Cup, while Jong and his team-mates will have to watch proceedings in Brazil next year from a distance before plotting their route to Russia.





WARRIOR SPIRIT

DESPITE HEADING TOWARDS THE TWILIGHT YEARS OF A SUCCESSFUL CAREER, JEONBUK HYUNDAI MOTORS' LEE DONG-GOOK IS NOT READY TO DISCUSS RETIREMENT PLANS JUST YET AS THE VETERAN KOREA REPUBLIC STRIKER EYES FURTHER SUCCESS WITH BOTH CLUB AND COUNTRY.

By: Andrew Mullen • Photos: World Sport Group



Below Lee Dong-gook (second left) following his maiden FIFA World Cup appearance against Holland in France.

Right Lee Dong-gook was named MVP and finished as top scorer in the 2011 AFC Champions League.

Below Right He helped Jeonbuk qualify for the 2013 AFC Champions League following a runner-up finish in the 2012 K-League.



Lee Dong-gook

Nationality:
Korea Republic
DOB:
29/04/1979
Position:
Striker
Current club:
Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors
(Korea Republic)
Previous clubs:
Pohang Steelers
(Korea Republic)
Werder Bremen
(Germany)
Sangju Sangmu
Phoenix (Korea Republic)
Middlesbrough
(England)
Seongnam Ilhwa Chunma
(Korea Republic)

A substitute appearance against Argentina in South Africa almost three years ago ended a 12-year wait for Lee Dong-gook to return FIFA World Cup finals, and while international retirement is not being contemplated just yet, the veteran striker is determined not to let another – and probably – final chance to appear on the world stage slip by in Brazil next year.

Lee was Korea's youngest player at the 1998 FIFA World Cup in France and the 19-year-old's substitute appearance against Holland in Marseille was expected to be just a taste of what was to come for the highly rated teenager.

But Lee was a high-profile absentee of squads at both the 2002 tournament in Korea/ Japan and 2006 edition in Germany after first being overlooked by Guus Hiddink before suffering a knee injury that ended his hopes four years later.

Injury again threatened ahead of South Africa, but the 2008 K-League top-scorer recovered from his latest set-back and eventually featured against both Argentina and Uruguay as Korea reached the Round of 16.

And with the former Pohang Steelers striker a regular fixture for Korea on the road to Brazil under former Jeonbuk coach Choi Kang-hee,

"I am confident we will qualify for the World Cup finals again. The belief that we can achieve this will help us achieve our goal. The level of Asian football is improving across every team, but if we play well and to our ability and talent, we will be able to secure a World Cup finals ticket."

Lee is determined to guide the Taeguk Warriors to an eighth consecutive finals appearance next year.

"I am confident we will qualify for the World Cup finals again. The belief that we can achieve this will help us achieve our goal. The level of Asian football is improving across every team, but if we play well and to our ability and talent, we will be able to secure a World Cup finals ticket," said Lee.

"You can't compare 2002 with 2006. The experience of the 2002 World Cup gave was a huge learning experience for me and the lesson I learnt was good. I looked at myself then and I started again with new attitude.

"I do not want to talk about the future because there is a lot of time still remaining. I am just concentrating on every game. I am not thinking too far ahead about the World Cup in 2014, I am just concentrating on 2013 and then hopefully I will be in the right place for 2014 when that time comes."

Following his return to Korea in 2008 and subsequent switch from Seongnam

Ilhwa Chunma, Lee has already enjoyed considerable success under current national team coach Choi after the pair helped Jeonbuk to two K-League titles in three years and an AFC Champions League final appearance.

Lee's struggles in England during a two-year spell with Middlesbrough are well documented, but after returning to Korea with Seongnam in 2008, he won the K-League title in his first season with Jeonbuk in 2009 before repeating the feat two years later.

The pair fell short of completing the double in 2011 as Jeonbuk lost the AFC Champions League final on penalties to Qatar's Al Sadd, but Lee feels former defender Choi is the right man to lead Korea to Brazil before his expected return to Jeonbuk following the completion of the qualifying campaign.

"I met Choi Kang-hee in 2009 and I can say this was a turning point in my life. He is a leader and coach not only for me, but the whole Korean national football team," added Lee.

"I am confident we will lead us to the 2014 World Cup finals. Everybody knows he is a great coach who has a huge ability and talent to achieve this goal."

After Choi answered an SOS call from the Korean Football Association at the end of 2011 with question marks hanging over Korea's qualification hopes, Jeonbuk did manage a runner-up finish in the K-League last season although the 2008 champions failed to advance past the group stage of the AFC Champions League for the first time.

Having being named as the tournament's Most Valuable Player and finishing as the competition's leading scorer after netting nine goals as Jeonbuk reached the 2011 AFC Champions League final, Lee's four goals last year were unable to help his side advance past the group stage.

The 2009 and 2011 K-League MVP also broke the goalscoring record in the Korean top-flight last season on his way to claiming 28 domestic goals for Jeonbuk.

"Records are not important to be at the moment, I will think about the records when I'm finished with football," he added. "I am still looking to improve so records don't matter to me at the moment."

Continued success in front of goal for

Jeonbuk this season, though, would be good news for Korea as they seek to extend their record of appearing at every FIFA World Cup since Mexico 1986, although this year Lee recognises the need for him to take on more of a leadership role within the club following

"I met Choi Kang-hee in 2009 and I can say this was a turning point in my life. He is a leader and coach not only for me, but the whole Korean national football team."

large scale off-season changes.

"The team has changed a lot this season due to military service and also some players have transferred to other clubs, but we still have a group of talented players and our pre-season training camp in Brazil helped bring the team together," said Lee.

"As a senior player this is one of my responsibilities which I am happy to do for the club."

Above Against Uzbekistan during the final round of qualifiers for the 2014 FIFA World Cup.





WHAT NEXT FOR SINGAPORE FOOTBALL?

SINGAPORE WERE CROWNED ASEAN CHAMPIONS FOR A RECORD FOURTH TIME IN DECEMBER, BUT WHAT IS THE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF SINGAPORE DOING TO ENSURE FUTURE SUCCESS IN THE LION CITY?

By: Colin Pereira

Photos: World Sport Group/Football Association of Singapore

When the Singapore national team travelled to Kuala Lumpur last November for the opening round of the ASEAN Football Federation Suzuki Cup, there were few who gave them much of a hope of returning with the region's biggest international title.

It had been a bad year to that point for the Lions, who had suffered a humiliating 7-1 defeat against Iraq in February, lost twice to the Philippines, managed just three wins - none against real quality opposition - in 11 matches and sunk to their lowest ever FIFA ranking of 163rd.

There had already been an overhaul of the team in the wake of their first round exit at the AFF Suzuki Cup two years earlier when the Football Association of Singapore publicly announced that the team had been disbanded, which signalled the end of the international careers of seasoned veterans like striker

Noh Alam Shah, midfielder Muhammad Ridhuan and defender Precious Emuejeraye.

But with no significant improvement in results and the contract of head coach Radogko "Raddy" Avramovic set to end soon after the tournament, there were calls from fans and some sections of the media to make an immediate coaching change and to give more new faces an opportunity to play.

Despite the clamour, the FAS stuck with the Serbian and his squad and their faith was rewarded when they kicked off their campaign with a 3-0 win over arch-rivals and defending champions Malaysia at the Bukit Jalil National Stadium.

The tournament was hardly plain sailing for the Lions as they lost influential midfielder Hariss Harun to a shin fracture in their second game, lost to a late goal against Indonesia and battled from two goals down to beat Laos 4-3 before they secured a narrow 1-0 aggregate victory against the Philippines in a hard-fought two-legged semi-final.





Still seen as the underdogs in the final against Thailand, Singapore won 3-1 in the first leg at a raucous Jalan Besar Stadium, and despite conceding a potentially confidence-sapping goal just before half-time in the return match at the Supachalasai Stadium, they repelled everything that the Thais could throw at them in the second half to win 3-2 on aggregate and lift the trophy for an unprecedented fourth time.

"In some ways we were a bit lucky and without luck and the determination of the players to win the trophy, I do not think we would have achieved this victory," said Avramovic as he brought the curtain down on his nine-year reign by lifting the regional title for a third time.

"I really must say a big thanks to the

them that we could achieve and that is good."

But as he took leave of the Singapore coaching job, the Serbian also sounded a note of warning that the Lions could not afford to rest on their laurels.

"If you are happy with what you have got now I do not think Singapore will achieve anything," he said.

"You have to improve as every other team in the region is improving. If you think you are now best and 'OK we are there', it is not right. You must look at ways of improving and there are many areas that can be improved."

In the wake of Avramovic's departure, former national player V. Sundramoorthy was named as the caretaker coach of the Lions, taking charge of their 4-0 loss to Jordan in their opening AFC Asian Cup 2015 qualifier in February.

73

Singapore's highest FIFA ranking in August 1993

That defeat, along with a 3-1 defeat by Bahrain in a friendly a few days earlier, was a clear sign that while Singapore are the



cream of ASEAN regional football, there is still much work to be done to bring the team up to a higher level on the continent.

So the onus is now on a new coach to take the Lions forward and while there is no shortage of candidates or opinions on just who should take over the hot seat, the FAS are keen on taking a measured approach to the new appointment and have engaged an international recruitment agency to help in their search.

"So far we are progressing quite well, so I don't want to pre-empt and jump the gun. Let us complete this process properly," said FAS President Zainudin Nordin when asked in February about the search for the new national coach.



Above
A third ASEAN title arrived in 2007.

Left Singapore won the Tiger Cup in 2004.

Below Singapore won the ASEAN title for the first time in 1998.



Left Prior to the second leg of the 2012 AFF Suzuki Cup final.

Below Raddy Avramovic guided Singapore to three ASEAN titles.



"What we are doing now is shortlisting the candidates, ensuring that they are of a certain calibre. Once we have done that, we will meet the shortlisted candidates and you know that they are not from Singapore alone, they are all from over the world. It would take some time to complete these conversations."

While it may be one of the smallest nations in Asia, Singapore has long been a hotbed for football on the continent. Formed in 1892 as the Singapore Amateur Football Association, the FAS can lay claim to being the oldest

4

Singapore's number of ASEAN titles

Football Association in Asia and they were also one of the founding members of the AFC

in 1952.

Prior to the country's independence in 1965, the FAS was already sending representative teams to compete in the Asian Cup and the Asian Games and, for the past half-century, they have regularly taken part in international competitions although their only appearance in the AFC Asian Cup came in 1984, when they hosted the tournament.

However, given its history as a British Straits Settlement, it was not international football that appealed most to Singapore football fans during the early post-colonial era but the Malaysia Cup, a competition that they had first competed for and won in 1921.

The Lions drew capacity crowds to the 55,000-seat National Stadium when



they won the competition for a 24th time in 1994 but just a year later, they announced their withdrawal from all Malaysian club competitions to focus on the establishment of a Singapore professional league.

Despite the growth of the S.League and the success of the national team in the ASEAN Football Championship, which they won in 1998, 2004 and 2007 before their fourth success in the re-branded AFF Suzuki Cup last year, the Malaysia Cup still resonates with Singapore football fans.

That was made clear last year when fans flocked to the Jalan Besar Stadium for the



debut of a new Singapore team, the Lions XII, in the Malaysian Super League.

Under Sundramoorthy, the Lions XII proved a hit both on and off the pitch as they finished second in the MSL and reached the semi-finals of the Malaysia Cup, where they lost in a penalty shootout to Malaysian Armed Forces.

Despite the team's success in going beyond the target of a top-five finish in the league, the FAS insist that the Lions XII are not just focused on success in the MSL but on developing the national team to compete for regional honours. Hence, the squad has been overhauled for the 2013 season with the target of blooding players for the upcoming U-23 tournament at the South-East Asian Games.

"For 2013, Sundram is leading a squad largely made up of Under-23 players – with the exception of five senior players aged above 23, namely captain Shahril Ishak, Baihakki Khaizan, Isa Halim, Hariss Harun and Fazrul Nawaz," says the FAS Deputy Director of Development & Planning Ridzal Saat.

"While the Lions XII players will continue to strive for success, it is our objective to prepare them for the SEA Games later this year in Myanmar. We are confident that the

experience and exposure in the Malaysian Super League will benefit our Under-23 players, most of whom are likely to represent Singapore at the SEA Games."

While the return to the Malaysia Cup has proven popular with fans, what about the S.League, which is now in its 18th year of operation?

Once regarded as one of the region's leading domestic club competitions, the S.League has been overshadowed in recent years by the growth of the professional leagues in Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia.

55,000

Capacity of the new National Stadium

To increase the profile of the S.League and interest in its clubs, the FAS has introduced a 'marquee player' system for the 2013 season which allows clubs to bring in higher-profile players who are not subject to the league's salary cap.

Former Japan World Cup star Kazuyuki Toda was one of the first players to be brought in under the new rule when he signed for Warriors

FC in February and the FAS is confident that the S.League can co-exist with the involvement of the Lions XII in the MSL.

"Both MSL and S.League offer attractive, exciting and competitive football, and entertaining matchday experiences for football fans," says Saat. "We are pleased to note that more fans are turning up for both Lions XII and S.League matches."

There is certainly plenty for Singapore football fans to look forward to in the next few years, not least the scheduled opening in 2014 of a state-of-the-art National Stadium on the site of the former stadium in Kallang.

The national team and the Lions XII have had to make do with the limited confines of the 8,000-seat Jalan Besar Stadium for the past three years, but the FAS recognise that there is a need for a bigger venue to better accommodate local football fans.

"Football plays a key role in community and nation bonding and it is one of the few sports that could attract 55,000 fans to the new stadium," says Saat. "We look forward to the national team playing at the new National Stadium from 2014 onwards."



Above Hariss Harun

Left Singapore captain Shahril Ishak (right) was named 2012 AFF Suzuki Cup MVR

Right Khairul Amri scored three goals at the 2012 AFF Suzuki Cup.

Below Lions XII

Bottom Jalan Besar Stadium



Q&A



**FAS Deputy Director
Development &
Planning Ridzal Saat**

How is the FAS looking to build on last year's AFF Suzuki Cup victory?

We will look to capitalise on that success and the football fever to continue to deliver greater achievements in all aspects of Singapore football, including the area of youth development. Apart from fulfilling footballing objectives, we will also continue to work with stakeholders, including corporate sponsors, to secure the necessary resources so as to expand our various initiatives aimed at using football to enhance social and community bonding in Singapore.

What initiatives are FAS implementing in youth development?

While we are encouraged by FIFA's assessment and comments that we have progressed well in the implementation of the Strategic Plan, including youth development, there remains much hard work ahead. FAS has established a total of six national age-group teams, including the newly-established National Football Academy U-13 and U-14 teams. The objective of the NFA is to provide our elite youth players with a systematic development training programme and to prepare these players to participate in the respective international age-group competitions such as the ASEAN Football Federation and the AFC U-16 and U-18 qualification competitions. The FAS also aims to send our NFA teams overseas to play against stronger teams in Asia and Europe on a regular basis so as to enhance their tactical, technical, mental and physical capabilities and capacities.

How would you evaluate the development of the NFA over the past 13 years?

Apart from the systematic training on a daily basis, our NFA players have also gained invaluable experience and exposure during their recent overseas trips as well as participation in high-profile competitions such as the Lions City Cup and NexLions Cup. We are pleased to note that some of them have been singled out by leading coaches as having the potential to progress far.

END IN SIGHT FOR TAMPINES' ROVER

ALEKSANDAR DURIC'S STORY IS ONE OF THE MOST COLOURFUL IN ASIAN FOOTBALL. HAVING KAYAKED AT THE OLYMPICS FOR HIS NATIVE BOSNIA AND WON THE AFF SUZUKI CUP FOR SINGAPORE, THE STRIKER IS NOW CLOSING IN ON THE FINAL SEASON OF A REMARKABLE CAREER WITH A DESIRE TO GIVE BACK TO THE SPORT THAT HAS PROVIDED HIM SO MUCH.

By: Colin Peiris • Photos: World Sport Group

When the final whistle sounded on the second leg of the AFF Suzuki Cup final between Thailand and Singapore last December, it signalled the triumphant conclusion to the remarkable international career of Aleksandar Duric.

At 37 – an age when most players would have long retired from the international game – the lanky striker made his debut for Singapore in a FIFA World Cup qualifier

in Tajikistan in 2007, scoring both of their goals in a 2-0 win.

Five years on from that match in Dushanbe, he pulled on a Lions' jersey for the 53rd and last time in the cauldron of Bangkok's Supachalasai Stadium.

Singapore lost the game 1-0 but, having beaten the Thais 3-1 three days earlier in Duric's final international match in the Lion City, they won 3-2 on aggregate and were crowned as ASEAN regional champions for an unprecedented fourth time.



Right Duric scored 24 goals in 53 games for Singapore between 2007 and 2012.

Far Right Duric made his last appearance for Singapore in the second leg of the 2012 AFF Suzuki Cup final against Thailand in December 2012.

Below Playing for Singapore Armed Forces in the 2009 AFC Champions League.



However, as he celebrated with his teammates on the Supachalasai pitch, Duric was left with some bittersweet feelings of his own.

"It was an unbelievable feeling to win that tournament," says the affable 42-year-old. "I was the happiest guy in the world but at the same time, it was also a sad moment for me because I knew it was my last international game."

"It had been a long journey but it finished on a high note as winning the AFF Suzuki Cup was something that I had dreamt of while playing for the national team for five years. And in the end, we did it so I was happy and relieved but at the same time, also sad that the journey was over."

While Duric may describe his five-year spell with the Singapore national team as 'a long journey', it is, in truth, just the latest chapter in the career of the 1.92-metre tall forward, who is now in the third decade of his career as a professional footballer which has seen him travel from his native Bosnia to Singapore via Hungary, Australia and China.

Born in 1970 near Doboj, in what was then the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, Duric spent his formative years in what was a multi-ethnic area where Muslims, Croats and Serbs lived alongside each other.

An accomplished sportsman, Duric excelled in his younger days at football, handball and sprint kayaking. In the latter, he

"It had been a long journey but it finished on a high note as winning the AFF Suzuki Cup was something that I had dreamt of while playing for the national team for five years. And in the end, we did it so I was happy and relieved but at the same time, also sad that the journey was over."

was a national age-group champion and he had a place in the top 10 in the world junior ranking at one time.

Required to do national service in his late teens, Duric underwent training to become a military officer in the Yugoslav army but he opted not to make the army his career and left at the end of his mandatory two-year stint to begin his fledgling football career at local side Sloga Doboj.

It proved a fateful decision. War was looming in the Balkans when Duric travelled to Sweden in 1992 to try out at a club there. He failed to land a contract and when he tried to return to his homeland via Hungary, he found that the borders had been closed after the outbreak of hostilities.

"It was a very difficult time," says Duric. "I lost my mother during the war and I didn't see my father and my brother for 10 years. But I had to try and get by on my own and so I had to work hard and make a lot of

sacrifices to ensure that I succeeded."

Stuck as a refugee in Hungary, Duric managed to secure a contract playing with local side Szeged. He personally avoided the worst ravages of the Yugoslav War and even represented Bosnia and Herzegovina in kayaking at

"It was a very difficult time," says Duric. "I lost my mother during the war and I didn't see my father and my brother for 10 years."

the 1992 Olympics after an unorthodox journey across Europe that involved hitchhiking on trucks and cars to get to Barcelona.

However, he remained stateless until 1994 when a coach he knew in Hungary approached him with an offer from an

Australian National Soccer League side.

"South Melbourne were looking for a tall defender," says Duric. "One of the coaches that I knew in Hungary had a connection so I thought why not? I played there for one season as a defender and I became an Australian citizen."

Duric spent the next few years playing for clubs in Australia with a short spell in China at second division side Locomotive Shanshan in 1997. However, his most significant move came in 1999 when he joined Singapore side Tanjong Pagar United in the S.League.

"I didn't know very much about Singapore when I was growing up in Doboj and when I stopped over on my way to Australia in 1994, the only thing that I remembered was that it was very hot," he says.

"Someone from Tanjong Pagar saw me playing in Australia and they called me to join them in 1999. I didn't even know that Singapore had a professional league back then and when I went to train there on my first day, I was shocked that their stadium was so small."

"But I enjoyed playing in the league and it has quite a high standard for South-East Asia. I've been playing in it now for 13 seasons and there have been ups and downs but I have a lot of good experiences."

During his time in the Lion City, Duric has

"I didn't know very much about Singapore when I was growing up in Doboj and when I stopped over on my way to Australia in 1994, the only thing that I remembered was that it was very hot!"

won a host of team and individual honours while playing for Tanjong Pagar, Home United, Geylang United, Singapore Armed Forces and Tampines Rovers. A seven-time S.League winner, he has twice won the Player of the Year award and became the first player to net 300 goals in the league in 2010.

So well did he settle in the island state that he decided to apply to become a citizen six years ago. A number of foreign-born players had seen their application for Singapore citizenship fast-tracked through the country's Foreign Talent Scheme for sportsmen but Duric made the decision to apply for a Singapore passport on his own and did so without assistance from the Football Association of Singapore.

"I had been living here for some time and all of my children had been born here," he explains. "So I decided that if I was staying here for so long, I wanted to become a citizen and to give something back to the community."

"Singapore reminds me of my hometown because it is so multicultural. When I tried to apply for citizenship, it took three times

before I was approved but I am grateful for what I have been given and now I want to give something back to this society and I hope to do that for the rest of my life."

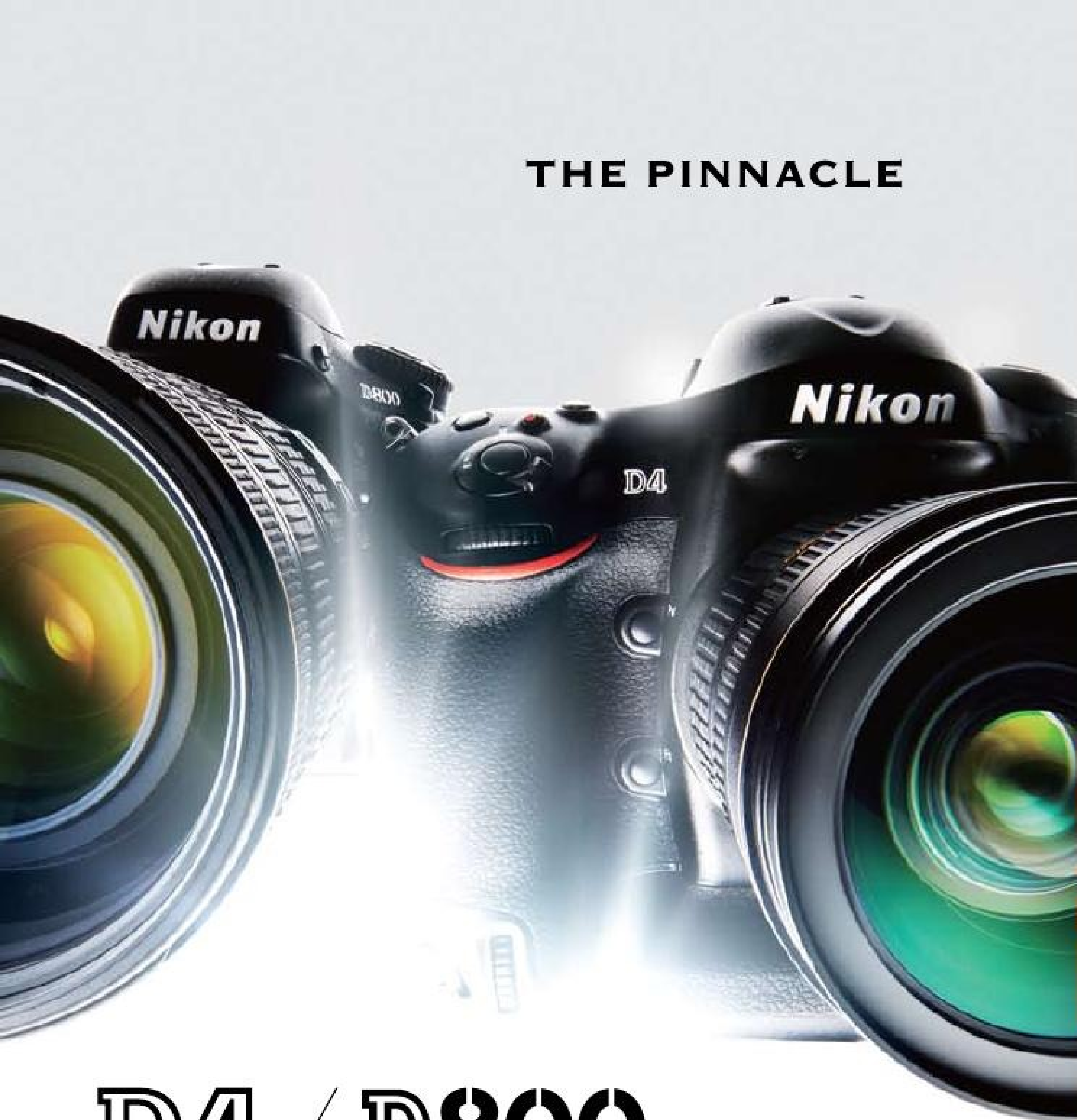
Duric's acquisition of a Singapore passport did not go unnoticed by national coach Radojko "Raddy" Avramovic, who soon drafted him into the national team.

"I didn't get my passport to play for the national team but Raddy believed that I

"Singapore reminds me of my hometown because it is so multicultural."

was fit to play for the national team and I enjoyed every moment that I played for them," he says.

Despite his age, Duric did not disappoint in his time as a Lion, netting 24 goals at an average of a goal nearly every other game. But while he was primarily deployed as a lone striker in many of those games, his dedication and versatility was apparent



THE PINNACLE

D4 / D800



At the heart of the image

PROFILE: ALEKSANDAR DURIC

"I will finish playing at end of year although I am unsure what I want to do after this season ends."

during the team's run to the AFF Suzuki Cup last year.

He began the tournament as a second-choice striker and he made history when he came off the bench to become the competition's oldest scorer, heading in his final international goal during the 3-0 thumping of defending champions Malaysia in Singapore's opening match.

But a tournament-ending injury to midfielder Hariss Harun saw Duric switch to the left flank as Avramovic sought to make the most of his limited resources.

"I had to play a different role as the coach and the team required. I had some experience playing in left midfield from about 20 years ago but Raddy needed someone to fill the position and so I did what I had to do for the team," Duric says.

"I didn't manage to score any more goals but I was not disappointed to be playing in that position because I helped to set up some important goals in the final. I enjoyed myself and I would actually be prepared to play

in any position even as goalkeeper because that's where I played when I was a boy.

"I only really became a main striker when I arrived in Singapore in 1999 and while I took a while to adjust to that, I am confident that I can now adapt my game to any position."

While he has called time on his international career, Duric intends to play one final season with Tampines Rovers, where he has taken on an additional role as the club's fitness coach. And while he has not lost any of his scoring touch, finding the net in each of Tampines' first two games in the 2013 AFC Cup, he is adamant that he will hang up his boots for the final time at the end of the season.

"I will finish playing at end of year although I am unsure what I want to do after this season ends," he says.

"What I do know is that I am going to remain in Singapore and that I want to be more involved in coaching. I would like to coach youth football, maybe focusing on disadvantaged kids and trying to push them to succeed in becoming better players.

"There are so many different possibilities of what could have happened to me. I had to work hard and sacrifice a lot to get here but now I hope that I can give something back because I am fortunate to be where I am now today."

Below Duric ended his five-year international career on a high as Singapore won the 2012 AFF Suzuki Cup.

Below Right Duric helped Tampines Rovers win the S.League title in both 2011 and 2012.



Aleksandar Duric

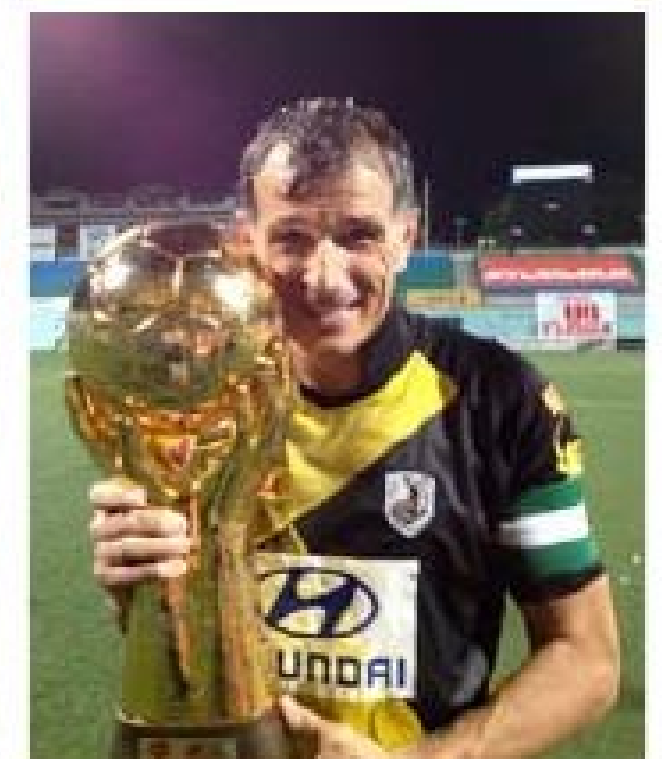
Nationality:
Singapore

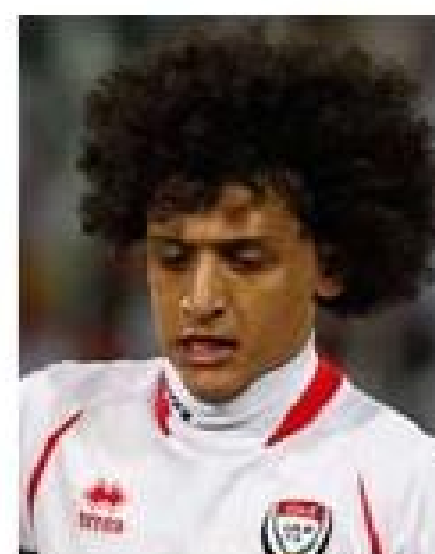
DOB:
12/08/1970

Position:
Striker

Current club:
Tampines Rovers
(Singapore)

Previous clubs:
Geylang United (Singapore)
Home United (Singapore)
Sydney Olympic (Australia)
Marconi Stallions (Australia)
Tanjong Pagar United (Australia)
Adelaide Sharks (Australia)
Heidelberg United (Australia)
West Adelaide (Australia)
Locomotive Shanshan (China)
Gippsland Falcons (Australia)
South Melbourne (Australia)
Port Melbourne Sharks (Australia)
South Melbourne (Australia)
Szeged LC (Hungary)
Sloga Doboj (Bosnia)





LEADER OF THE PACK

OMAR ADULRAHMAN HAS EMERGED AS THE MOST TALKED ABOUT FOOTBALLER IN THE MIDDLE EAST, CLAIMING THE MVP AWARD AT THIS YEAR'S GULF CUP AND STEERING AL AIN TO THE UAE PRO LEAGUE TITLE. NOW HE HAS SET HIS SIGHTS ON RESTORING THE UAE NATIONAL TEAM TO THE TOP OF THE ASIAN GAME.

By: John McAuley • Photos: World Sport Group





Omar Abdulrahman peers out from beneath his thick mop of crimped, dark brown hair, a slip of a boy with a gargantuan future. As Al Ain's creator-in-chief, he has just guided his club to successive UAE Pro League championships, while the prodigious playmaker continues to provide the catalyst to a country that in January collected only their second Gulf Cup crown.

Abdulrahman, voted the tournament's Most Valuable Player after scoring a sublime solo goal in the final against Iraq, is the golden child of the Emirates' golden generation.

"The award means a lot to me, but without my team-mates I wouldn't have been able to take it," says the refreshingly modest 21-year-old as he relaxes at a friend's house in Al Ain, only five minutes from the home he shares with his parents, three brothers and two sisters. "You think first about the achievement as a team and then come the personal accolades."

Expect more to follow. Certainly with the UAE national team, who in the past 17 months have steadily climbed FIFA's world rankings - they now sit 89th, 41 places better than in December 2011 - having enjoyed sustained success built on the

"We keep this same spirit as a team. It's not about names but teamwork - that's what makes this generation special."

foundations of Mahdi Ali's 2008 AFC U-19 Championship-winning side.

Under Ali, the same collection of players has reached the quarter-finals of the FIFA Youth World Cup in 2009, secured silver at the 2010 Asian Games, lifted the U-23 Gulf Cup trophy and qualified for last summer's London Olympics.

January's Gulf Cup triumph in Bahrain, again with Ali's expert guidance - "he is the captain of our ship," says Abdulrahman - and again prompted by his talisman's creative genius, has only further gilded the group's golden reputation.

"People have given us this name because in every championship we always honour the country and its people, and we feel like we can keep winning things," Abdulrahman says. "Why not? We keep this same spirit as a team. It's not about names but teamwork - that's what makes this generation special."

In Abdulrahman, the UAE boast something extra special. Born in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, to Yemeni parents, the young footballer honed his talents in street

games with his older brothers: Ahmed, Mohammed and Khalid. He would model his style on Zinedine Zidane, imitating the Frenchman's close control, perfect poise and eye for the killer pass.

Noting those attributes in the youngster, Al Hilal first approached Abdulrahman before Al Ain made their move, bringing him, Mohammed and Khalid to the Garden City. The family came, too, and was promptly given UAE citizenship.

Abdulrahman soon repaid the club, making his first-team debut in January 2009. By his 18th birthday, he had managed three goals. He was beginning to fulfill a dream.

"Football was my hobby from a young age," he says. "I always wished to be a footballer. I'd play with all my brothers, but it was Ahmed and my dad who took care of me, gave me more attention and helped develop my talent."

"In fact, my whole family has been very supportive. They've been the greatest influence on my career. I believe I've reached this level because of their

"And playing against players like Giggs and Luis Suarez, people who have made history in football, only made us push ourselves more."

prayers and the effort I put in.

"And with the blessing of God, I've achieved my dream, although there is definitely more to come."

Past performances for Al Ain suggest his confidence is not misplaced. With the club facing relegation in the 2010/11 campaign, Abdulrahman returned from a serious knee injury to spearhead their fight for survival, scoring six goals in the final seven games as Al Ain retained their top-flight status.

The following season, Abdulrahman collected his first Pro League winner's medal as Al Ain were crowned champions for the 10th time - their first in eight years.

Attentions have since transferred to the AFC Champions League with Abdulrahman announcing his arrival in the competition with a thumping volley and a clever assist in the opening

Group D encounter with Saudi Arabia's Al Hilal.

"We're not drawing comparisons with that team, who won so many titles, but will benefit from their instructions and experience to reach the highest point of success," Abdulrahman says. "For now we're not concentrating on the trophy, but on the next match and then move step-by-step."

Gradual progress has not always been Abdulrahman's way. His rise has been both swift and steep, highlighted by his contribution and subsequent celebration in London last summer.

Excelling in the UAE's first appearance at the Olympics, Abdulrahman received ringing endorsements from some lofty opponents with Great Britain captain Ryan Giggs donating a particular memento.

"I was playing against such a legend that I asked to exchange shirts," Abdulrahman says. "Giggs agreed, but then was substituted and I didn't get it. But after the game, as I was leaving, he saw me and called me to give me the jersey. It was such an honour to get it and to play on the

same pitch as him.

"The whole Olympics was great. We used to watch matches at Old Trafford and Wembley and dream we could some day reach a level where we played in those stadiums, too. That was a huge motivation for us and it made us feel we'd the capability to be like any other national team."

"And playing against players like Giggs and Luis Suarez, people who have made history in football, only made us push ourselves more. It didn't freak us out, it just made us want to prove ourselves."

Abdulrahman was given an immediate opportunity to prove himself. His endeavour at the Olympics was followed by a trial at Manchester City with the midfielder selected for a two-week stint with the Premier League champions.

"Honestly, it was an amazing experience," he says, eyes wide. "Not everyone gets the chance to train with the champions of England. However, the players may be the best in the Premier League - proper professionals - but they were so down to earth."

"They were very supportive, guiding me on the pitch, giving me advice. Once Kolo Toure saw me he asked 'are you the UAE player?' and I was surprised he

*Left & Above
Abdulrahman
quickly adapted
to life in the AFC
Champions League
with a goal against
Saudi Arabia's Al
Hilal in February.*

*Far Right
Abdulrahman was
named MVP after
inspiring the UAE to
victory in January's
Gulf Cup.*

even knew me. He told me 'you have the skill and the potential and are here to sign a contract'.

"And I told him 'Inshallah, I hope to... if things go well.'"

The inability to obtain a work permit prevented a transfer, though. City were reportedly willing to take Abdulrahman on a four-year contract, yet the UAE's rank outside the top 70 in the FIFA standings, and the player's failure to feature in 75% of the country's matches during the past two years, meant Abdulrahman began this season back at Al Ain.

"I'm not upset," he responds. "I'm very happy at Al Ain, although the experience made me think more about being a professional, of playing in a big league."

That possibility seems closer than ever. Al Ain will soon host delegates from a selection of established European clubs, with the view to negotiating a deal to make Abdulrahman the first Emirati to ply his trade permanently outside the Emirates. The prospect does not fill him with any trepidation. After all, this is arguably the most gifted footballer in UAE history.

"I'm ready for it," Abdulrahman says. "I'm ready to show Emiratis can play in the top leagues, to do my country and its Sheikhs proud."

Continue his current form for the national team, and he will accomplish that anyway. There is a distinct belief

"The Asian Cup in two years in Australia is the closest championship, so we're concentrated on that."

this UAE team, trinkets and trophies already amassed, can match the famous side that qualified for the 1990 FIFA World Cup - the country's only showing on football's grandest stage.

For Abdulrahman, who admits failure to make Brazil next year still gnaws, the UAE are well equipped to thrive in Russia in 2018. Not that he is getting ahead of himself.

"The Asian Cup in two years in Australia is the closest championship, so we're concentrated on that," he says. "We've started well with two wins in Group E, so to be there is our first ambition."

Would winning it be the second?

"Nothing is impossible," he says.

"In every championship our aim is to win, to prove ourselves again. We did that at the Gulf Cup. It was a hard tournament and we're all young, and although people expected some good results, they didn't believe we'd win the cup."

"So we were determined to make everyone connected to the country

happy, including all the supporters in Bahrain cheering us. We didn't feel any pressure at all; we're used to that atmosphere and expectation, playing in finals."

"We love being in that situation, it's what makes us play our best. And I believe whatever God has written for us, we will see it."

Abdulrahman, who now ranks Andres Iniesta as his favourite player and Barcelona his preferred team, has a formidable future all of his own, seemingly written in the stars. The modesty, though, remains.

"Like I said, it's an achievement, but not a personal one," he replies when quizzed once more on his goal in the Gulf Cup final. Deep into Iraq's half, Abdulrahman slalomed past two defenders, feinted another and unleashed a shot that found the back of the net.

"It was teamwork," he continues, without a hint of sarcasm. "It's the most precious goal I've scored, and one I'll watch again and again and remember for ever, but only because it made the country proud. It's not important who scored or didn't: this is a team who achieves everything together. And we want to achieve much more."

John McAuley is a sports reporter for Abu Dhabi-based newspaper *The National*.

Left: Abdulrahman scored twice as the UAE won the 2013 Gulf Cup.

Below: With former Al Ain team-mate Yasser Al Qadani following February's meeting with Al Hilal in the AFC Champions League.



Omar Abdulrahman

Nationality:
United Arab Emirates
DOB:
20/09/1991
Position:
Midfielder
Current club:
Al Ain (UAE)
Honours:
Gulf Cup 2012; UAE Pro
League 2012, 2013
Awards:
Gulf Cup 2012 Most
Valuable Player



FOOTBALL TAKE ME HOME

ON MARCH 16, 2011 THE EAST COAST OF JAPAN WAS DEVASTATED BY THE TOHOKU EARTHQUAKE, A NATURAL DISASTER WHICH TRIGGERED AN ENORMOUS TSUNAMI AND A NUCLEAR CRISIS. JUST TWO YEARS LATER, THOUGH, VEGALTA SENDAI, ONE OF THE J.LEAGUE CLUBS MOST AFFECTED BY THE DISASTER, HAVE QUALIFIED FOR THE AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE FOR THE FIRST TIME EVER.

By: Scott McIntyre • Photos: World Sport Group/GPO Films





Even by the eclectic standards of the J.League it was a strange sight. Hundreds of Vegalta Sendai supporters, having made the lengthy journey to Kanagawa, just outside of Tokyo, for the second round of the 2011 season, were welcomed by the most unusual of greetings.

Their opponents, Kawasaki Frontale, flew not their own famous blue and black flags but rather those in the yellow of the visitors and then proceeded to chant 'Vegalta Sendai, Vegalta Sendai, Vegalta Sendai' for the better part of five minutes.

There was, of course, good reason for the newfound camaraderie between the two clubs, as evidenced by the simple hand-scratched sign

"At first we couldn't even think about football because we couldn't simply lead our regular lives."

Vegalta Sendai chairman Yoichi Shirahata

Founded: 1994

Ground: Sendai Stadium 2002, Sendai (19,694)

Address: 4/F Gyoshinki Building, 3-6-16 Horcho, Aoba, Sendai, Miyagi 980-0014, Japan

Website: www.vegalta.co.jp

J.League: Runners-up 2012

J2: 2009

held aloft in the away end.

"We will not lose until we have our hometown back," it read.

Exactly six weeks earlier the largest recorded earthquake to ever strike Japan, triggering a tsunami with 40 metre high waves, had devastated much of the nation's northeastern coast.

Whole villages were simply washed away.

250,000 homes were destroyed, hundreds of thousands of people were displaced and more than 15,000 lives were lost.

Of those, almost two-thirds came from the prefecture, Miyagi, of which Sendai is the capital.

In the weeks immediately following the disaster football, naturally, took a backseat.

The J.League had only kicked off the weekend prior and was immediately suspended as officials, players and fans alike set about ensuring the most basic aspects of life were looked after.

There was intense debate as to the place of sport in general with some calling for the entire season to be abandoned yet slowly those seeking a release, some kind of relief, began to realise that the return of football was a way to ease a little of the pain.

A month and a half later, the J.League resumed with most attention focused on Vegalta – a club that was left without a training ground after it had been submerged following the tsunami and whose stadium took weeks to repair the buckles and cracks forged by the 9.0-magnitude quake.

The resumption of the league was a

"At the end of the day, players can go play where they choose but fans can't make that choice, they inherit a club."

Director Douglas Hurcombe

chance to show that the region could bounce back to its feet and could be a symbol of Japan's recovery.

"At first we couldn't even think about football because we couldn't simply lead our regular lives," said club chairman Yoichi Shirahata.

"Then after a couple of weeks we started to think about what we could or what we should do as a club.

"We decided it was important to perform well and show good results – that's our way of helping to encourage people in the areas that were damaged. That's the best response that we, as a club, could make."

Vegalta has long been a standard-bearer for football in northern Japan; as one of only two professional clubs within a 200-kilometre radius they are renowned for their passionate – and often quirky – support.

Eschewing the usual generic pre-match

Left: The aftermath of the March 2011 earthquake and tsunami.

Above: Sendai mark their maiden appearance in the AFC Champions League with a 1-1 draw against Thailand's Buriram United in February 2013.

song routines found in much of the country, the Vegalta supporters have adopted an old American country classic, John Denver's Take Me Home Country Roads, as the song to be sung – or rather hummed – as the players take the field.

Another fan favourite is a reworking of Twisted Sister's 1980's angst-anthem We're Not Gonna Take It, reworked to the lyrics of 'Vegalta Sendai, let's go. We'll always be by your side.'

The club's compact Sendai Stadium may hold only 20,000, but as one of the few football-specific stadia in Japan, the atmosphere on matchdays is usually frenzied, yet there was an expectation that things may have been slightly more sombre when Vegalta finally returned home, against Urawa, on the last weekend of May 2011.

While there was the occasional tearful

reunion and the haunting sight of numerous reserved seats sitting empty, the fans chose to mark the occasion as a celebration of just what the club and the community meant to each other.

Akihito Shibuya is a lifelong supporter who attended every one of the club's home matches last season and spoke of just how deep those bonds are.

"I realised that I am so lucky to have a football team such as this in my local town – they gave so much hope and encouragement to the people of Sendai," he said. "We had

"Even before the earthquake we had the basis of a good side, but afterwards we put more emphasis on the passion for recovery and we can certainly see that as one of the reasons behind our recent success."

Vegalta Sendai coach Makoto Teguramori



such a tough time after the earthquake but I saw that Vegalta is actually helping to support our lives.

"This was a hard time for everybody, not just the club but of course also many of the supporters suffered as well. Even during that time we saw the amount of effort that the players were putting in and that in turn encouraged us in our personal struggle. They showed us an idea of courage and an attitude of never giving up."

That attitude was defined by a coaching and playing group that had made a conscious effort to help the recovery any way they could, both on and off the field.

As a senior officer within the prefectural government in charge of the recovery program, Satoshi Ishizeki saw first-hand just how the club helped lift spirits within Sendai and beyond.

"Of course the club has been doing well on the pitch, and that has encouraged a lot of people to come and watch the matches and feel part of the club," he explains.

"But in addition to that the club has forged deep links with the community after the

Left Makoto Teguramori took charge of Sendai in January 2008.

Top DPR Korea international midfielder Ryang Yong-gi.

Above Brazilian striker Wilson.

disaster – the players have been deeply involved in volunteer work and with meeting children affected by this disaster, holding coaching clinics and so on.

"The players from Vegalta Sendai are carrying on their shoulders the thoughts from the stricken area and when the people of Miyagi see how hard the club and players are working it gives them a high motivation to move forward with the recovery."

It was this common bond between a football team and their local community – so often absent in recent years – that drew an English film crew to make a documentary about the club.

Directors Douglas Hurcombe and Geoff Trodd have made several trips to Sendai to record 'this wonderful club that has been produced through a close co-operation between the supporters and the playing team.'

According to Hurcombe, the main focus of

the film, titled 'Football Take Me Home,' is on the 'remarkable' group of supporters at Vegalta Sendai and the links between football and community.

"Usually the only time at football clubs when the fans have a voice is when they want the chairman or the coach sacked or maybe to complain about the price of beer, but here things are totally different, the fans are a deep part of the club," said Hurcombe.

"After the earthquake the fans, individually, felt powerless and when you visit some of the places touched by this disaster you can understand why. Yet collectively they laid down a gauntlet to the team that they must move forward – the banner at the Kawasaki match symbolised that.

"It comes from an intense feeling of pride in their home, in Sendai. The fans feel that they and the club are representatives of the city.

"At the end of the day, players can go play where they choose but fans can't make that choice, they inherit a club.

"That banner was a direct challenge – go

out and achieve success. We'll give you every bit of energy we have, we'll push and cajole but you must do it."

And do it they did. Given the backdrop of what had occurred, hopes were not high for Sendai for the remainder of the 2011 season yet the club defied all odds to produce their finest ever J.League performance.

Starting with the Kawasaki fixture, where a late goal from defender Jiro Kamata gave them a 2-1 win, they embarked on a remarkable unbeaten run of 11 matches. At home they were even better, not losing until July and then only once more for the remainder of the season as they charged to a fourth-placed finish in what was only their fourth top-flight campaign.

Last season they went even better – losing just twice at home and conceding less than a goal a match at Sendai Stadium as they finished second behind champions Sanfrecce Hiroshima. That booked Makoto Teguramori's side their maiden ticket to the AFC Champions League and, as the long-serving coach points out, a welcome chance to showcase their club, and hometown, on the continental stage.

Top Left Yoshiaki Ohia

Top Right Brazilian midfielder Heberty.

Above Naoki Ishikawa

"Of course to retain our position in Asia we must do well in the J.League but the AFC Champions League is also a key priority for our club," said the 45-year-old. "I've always said that we must fight hard to be successful in Asia. This is our way of showing to Asia that we are fighting hard to recover."

"Even before the earthquake we had the basis of a good side, but afterwards we put more emphasis on the passion for recovery and we can certainly see that as one of the reasons behind our recent success."

That the club has managed the results of the past two years is impressive enough in itself but it's even more so when they lack the 'star' power of some of the league and the region's big-hitters.

Their quartet of foreign players consists of three Brazilians who between them have been at 17 clubs over the past four seasons and long-serving club captain, DPR Korea midfielder Ryang Yong-gi – hardly the 'big name' imports

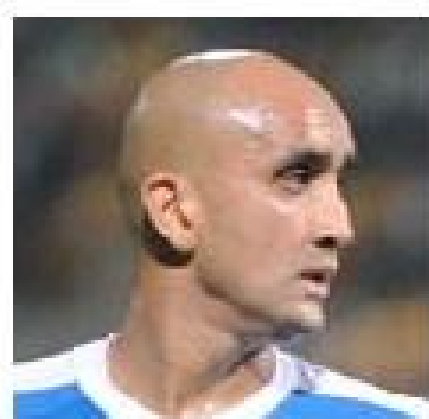
many in the AFC Champions League employ.

Only veteran Atsushi Yanagisawa from the current squad has represented Japan whilst at Vegalta and they are a side best described as 'functional.'

Coach Teguramori usually adopts a deep, pragmatic 4-3-3 system without a conventional 'number 10,' relying heavily on wing play to feed the two main goal sources, Brazilian Wilson and Shingo Akamine – the club's leading scorer for the past two seasons.

Akamine is one of seven players who featured on that early spring afternoon in 2011 who remain with the club; the day the first steps were taken on the road to recovery. Many in and around the club don't want to be defined solely by the disaster, but as Teguramori notes: "Right from the moment of the earthquake I have said that we will never stop fighting because we want to be a symbol of recovery."

It's a promise they have fulfilled with spectacular success.



ONE DAY AT A TIME

BORN AND BRED IN ENGLAND, THE HOME OF THE MODERN GAME, ZESH REHMAN REPRESENTED THE LAND OF HIS BIRTH AT AGE GROUP LEVEL BEFORE COMMITTING TO PLAYING INTERNATIONALLY FOR PAKISTAN AND SETTING SAIL FOR ASIA. NOW WITH KITCHEE IN HONG KONG AFTER A STINT IN THAILAND, IT'S A JOURNEY THAT CONTINUES TO ENRICH THE 29-YEAR-OLD'S CAREER.

By: Michael Chubb • Photos: World Sport Group/Ansom Lamy/Getty Images



The tattoo inked onto the inside of Zesh Rehman's left forearm leaves no room for doubt about the central defender's approach to life and his already eventful, colourful and nomadic career.

'Day-to-day' it reads in flowing, blue script, outlining a philosophy that has taken the Birmingham-born 29-year-old on an a journey through all four divisions of English professional football, appearances for England at youth level before switching allegiance to Pakistan and playing club football in Thailand and in his current home of Hong Kong.

For a player who has yet to turn 30, Rehman boasts a remarkable resume featuring the kind of diverse experiences that mark him out as a pioneer amongst his peer group, becoming the first player of Pakistani descent to play in the English Premier League.

But nothing stands out more than his decision to commit to playing for Pakistan at a time when he was held up as the poster boy of the Britain's Asian community.

Despite the large South Asian diaspora that now calls England home, no one from within the community rooted in Pakistan, India and Bangladesh has graduated to representing the England national team in the nation's favourite sport.

And, while other ethnic groups have broken down the barriers over the years, a community that has become increasingly visible in modern English society has yet to break into the upper echelon of the national game.

Early in his career, Rehman embodied a dream that might be fulfilled, that someone of Pakistani origin could go on to play for England.



"It wasn't that I doubted myself but you have to be realistic and think how you can prolong your career playing international football and I decided to play for Pakistan because I genuinely thought that would be the best opportunity to play international football for a long period of time."

Having represented the country at U-18, U-19 and U-20 level during his time coming through the ranks at Fulham, the excitement around Rehman was understandable.

But, as time wore on and the opportunities faded away, Rehman displayed a pragmatism that, despite external pressures, has continued to inform his career.

"I think any British Asian lad growing up in England, Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland now should look to play for that country first, where they are born, and I was no different," says Rehman as he looks back on the decision he took to sign up for

Pakistan. "That should be your first choice.

"But if you've got dual nationality and your parents are from Asia, then it can work in your favour because you can have a longer international career. That was really the thinking behind it for me.

"It wasn't that I doubted myself but you have to be realistic and think how you can prolong your career playing international football and I decided to play for Pakistan because I genuinely thought that would be the best opportunity to play international football for a long period of time."

Rehman committed himself to playing for Pakistan — where both his mother and father were born before moving to the United

"The normal perception of Pakistan is that it's all cricket. But I have no regrets about playing for Pakistan and it's one of the best decisions I've made to be honest."

Kingdom — in late 2005 and his decision prompted a mixture of reactions, some of them surprising.

"Within the [British] Asian media there was a little bit of criticism, funnily enough, because they thought I should push on to play for England, but it's not that simple," he says. "It's not that easy to say I'll play for England because obviously there's so much competition and there are established players.

"If you look back now, over the last 10 years, the two centre backs have been the same up until recently, John Terry and Rio Ferdinand. So I think, no matter who you were, it would have been hard to dislodge them anyway.

"But amongst my peers and friends and team-mates there was not a lot

of surprise because they knew I had Pakistani parentage but there was surprise because they didn't really know that Pakistan had a national team. So there was a lot of banter around that, all harmless banter.

"The normal perception of Pakistan is that it's all cricket. But I have no regrets about playing for Pakistan and it's one of the best decisions I've made to be honest."

Playing for Pakistan thrust Rehman into a whole new realm of unfamiliar experiences that flew in the face of what he had previously dealt with playing professionally in England, but he sees the challenge as one to be met head on and has great hopes for the future.

"It was an amazing feeling to go there, there were a lot of people waiting to meet me at the airport, a lot of fans, a lot of media," he says of his first trip to Pakistan to play for the national side. "It was something I didn't expect but great to see that there was that interest.

"In my first few games, the stadium was full for the South Asian Cup in Karachi. My mum and dad were born there so it was great for them to see. The stadium was full and people say

Top Left A product of the Fulham academy, Rehman made 26 appearances for the Cottagers.

Far Left, Right & Below In action for Karachi in the 2013 AFC Cup.





there's no passion for football there, but that will always stay with me. The sight of the little kids shaking the fence and trying to get to the pitch and come up to you, it's something that gives encouragement for the future," he adds.

"It opens up your mind to football across Asia and I've been lucky enough to play in different countries for Pakistan, it's a good experience football wise but also for travel and life experience wise.

"And it's a good reminder of what you have as a professional, because the league in Pakistan and the players there haven't experienced what you have so it's good to pass on that knowledge and experience to them and try to improve things for them. On many levels it was a good decision.

"But it's been like chalk and cheese. It couldn't be any more different in terms of facilities, professionalism and attitude because Pakistan is not a force. Even within South Asia it could be doing a lot better than it is.

"You go there and the training facilities aren't anywhere near what I was used to, or the pitches, but you have to adapt and be open minded and accept the level that it's at and that they are trying to make improvements to the local players, the local league and the local infrastructure. It takes time.

"Look at Japan 20 years ago. They started at the very bottom, developed their own youth and now they are a force within Asia and one

"In the league you can make mistakes and not get punished but in the AFC Cup you make a mistake it can lead to a goal or to a chance."

of the leading countries in the world that always gets to World Cup. So there's a lot to be done but it was a good eye opener."

Rehman has already started to play his role in trying to improve matters in Pakistan, working with his team-mates and the coaching staff on all aspects of their approach to matches, from tactics to pre-game preparation. Ultimately, he has his eye on moving into coaching, having already started work on acquiring the qualifications necessary to take the next step in his career.

But before hanging up his boots, Rehman has other goals he wants to achieve. After a season spent in Thailand with Muangthong United, he signed for Hong Kong's Kitchee in January 2012, in time to help the club secure a trophy-winning treble as well as representing the club in the AFC Cup - his second appearance in the competition after making his debut in the tournament with Muangthong.

The challenge of continental competition is one that has added to Rehman's experience of playing in Asia.

"Each league, especially in South East Asia, Thailand, Singapore or Malaysia and also into Hong Kong, there are one or two or three teams who are a bit better than the rest of the local league so when you play against Tampines, they're not a high, high level, but they're the same as Kitchee, South China, Muangthong, Chonburi," he says.

"There are all these teams. The level isn't very, very high but it's different to the local league. In the league you can make mistakes and not get punished but in the AFC Cup you make a mistake it can lead to a goal or to a chance.

"To play in it for three years running now has been great, to travel to so many different countries. My passport has 10 years remaining but all of the pages have finished! There's so much travel but it's great to see different stadiums, different fans, different food, different culture."

Wherever he has played, Rehman has made an effort to adapt to the local surroundings as quickly as possible. Despite playing in Thailand for only one season he now speaks "60 to 70% Thai" and has shown his entrepreneurial spirit by launching an iPhone application that helps

players break down linguistic barriers.

Called 'Football Talk', the free download helps teach players basic but vital phrases needed to be able to survive both on and off the field in a number of Asian languages, including Thai, Cantonese and Mandarin with more in the pipeline.

His work away from football does not stop there. Having established the Zesh Rehman Foundation back in his native England, the shaven-headed defender is looking to use his profile to offer opportunities to others who were not as fortunate as himself to make a living out of football.

"Over the years I was inundated with letters from kids, and not just Asian kids but kids from all backgrounds that wanted advice or support to get involved in football in some way," he says.

"So the thinking behind it was, in football there are hundreds of jobs, whether it be groundsman, kitman, media, aside from the playing side there are coaching roles and there are loads of people who love football but maybe won't be good enough to be players yet want to be in and around football.

"I wanted to show them that, no matter where you're from, or what you are like academically or football wise, you can be involved so it was set up to give these kids some kind of opportunity."

The foundation has received backing

from the English Premier League and has the support of clubs such as Queens Park Rangers with Rehman looking to extend its reach further in the future.

For now, though, he's relishing life in Hong Kong, even though he has set his sights on sampling what the sport has to offer elsewhere, and in particular in the Middle East.

"Everything about the place, I'm loving it but I don't think I'll be here forever," he says of life in the former British colony. "I'm 29 and reaching the age that is the peak for a centre back and I'd like to test myself in another league that's a bit stronger. But I'm here now and the club have been great and I'm enjoying it.

"In 10 years time Qatar will have the World Cup and I think people will start to take football in Asia more seriously, so I'd like to be there eight, nine, 10 years early and be a part of it when things really take off.

"I've just got a feeling that when the World Cup comes round, it will be so big. The Qataris are sending delegations around the world and building their academy now, but also for family reasons and religious reasons it would probably be more suitable than say Japan or Korea.

"But let's see, you can never look too far in football. It changes so quickly. You can have one idea and then another opportunity presents itself."

Left: Rehman is making his third appearance in the AFC Cup this year after also playing in the continental competition for Thailand's Muangthong United.

Below: Rehman has called Hong Kong home since January 2012.



Zesh Rehman

Nationality:
Pakistan

DOB:
14/10/1983

Position:
Defender

Current club:
Kitchee (Hong Kong)

Previous clubs:
Fulham (England)
Brighton & Hove Albion (England)
Norwich (England)
Queens Park Rangers (England)

Blackpool (England)
Bradford (England)
Muangthong United (Thailand)



All Roads Lead To Sydney

STADIUM AUSTRALIA WILL HOST THE FINAL OF THE 2015 AFC ASIAN CUP, WHILE VENUES IN MELBOURNE, CANBERRA, BRISBANE AND NEWCASTLE WERE ALSO CONFIRMED FOR THE CONTINENTAL SHOWPIECE.

Stadium Australia will add the 2015 AFC Asian Cup final to its growing list of sporting highlights after being confirmed as the venue for the continental showpiece.

The 84,000 capacity venue will host seven games in total during the tournament, which will take place in January 2015, including the final as well as a quarter-final and semi-final – which will be played on January 26, Australia Day.

Having been the scene for one of Australia's most iconic football moments as the nation secured a ticket to the 2006 FIFA World Cup in Germany against Uruguay in November 2005, the Socceroos will also play one group stage match at the venue.

Stadium Australia officially opened in June 1999 while the venue, which is located

within Sydney Olympic Park, has hosted the NRL Grand Final, 2003 Rugby World Cup Final, the British & Irish Lions as well as AFL.

"The staging of the 2015 AFC Asian Cup in Australia is just reward for the growth of football in this country," said New South Wales Minister for Sport Graham Annesley after Newcastle was also named as one of five venues for the 2015 AFC Asian Cup.

"Successive FIFA World Cup campaigns have positioned Australia on the world football stage, and I'm confident both Stadium Australia and Newcastle Stadium will ensure fans experience and enjoy these world class facilities during the Asian Cup."

Melbourne Rectangular Stadium, which will host the opening ceremony on January 9, Brisbane Stadium and Canberra Stadium were also confirmed as venues for the three-week 16-team tournament.

"The Asian Cup offers a unique opportunity to showcase Australia as a world-class host for major sporting events and as an attractive tourist destination," said Federal Minister for Sport Kate Lundy.

"The spin-off for the Cup will be enormous for Australia with a global TV audience of most than 2.5 billion people expected and an estimated 45,000 international visitors set to visit our shores."

Defending champions Japan along with hosts Australia as well as Korea Republic and DPR Korea have already secured qualification for the 2015 AFC Asian Cup while the race for 11 places has already begun with the preliminary competition.

With the qualifiers, which started in January, finishing in March next year, the winner of the 2014 AFC Challenge Cup will complete the 16-team line-up for the finals.



Newcastle Stadium, Newcastle

Capacity: 33,000

Newcastle Stadium is at the centre of Newcastle's vibrant sport-loving culture and is the home ground for A-League side Newcastle Jets and the Newcastle Knights rugby league team.

Completion of the stadium's state of the art \$81 million Western Grandstand in 2011 increased the stadium's capacity and delivered new corporate suites, media facilities, function rooms and changing rooms.

This year Newcastle Stadium will host the third test between Australia and the British & Irish Lions, while the venue has also hosted high-profile football, rugby league and rugby union matches.

Later this year, Newcastle Stadium will also host the opening ceremony of the Special Olympics Asia Pacific Regional Games.



Melbourne Rectangular Stadium, Melbourne

Capacity: 30,000

Melbourne Rectangular Stadium was opened in May 2010 and has rapidly become a centrepiece for sport in Melbourne. The venue hosted Australia's 2014 FIFA World Cup qualifier against Saudi Arabia in 2012, while the venue is also the home ground for Melbourne's two A-League clubs – Melbourne Victory and Melbourne Heart.

The stadium has also hosted several rugby and rugby league internationals.

In addition to Melbourne Rectangular Stadium's renowned crowd atmosphere, players enjoy world class playing and training facilities – including a pitch rated by the Professional Footballers Association as the best in the A-League.



Canberra Stadium, Canberra

Capacity: 25,000

Canberra Stadium is an iconic Australian sporting venue which plays host to Super Rugby's University of Canberra Brumbies and the NRL's Canberra Raiders.

The venue has played host to a number of international events including the 2000 Olympic football tournament, 2003 Rugby World Cup and 2008 Rugby League World Cup.

Set amidst the native bushland of North Canberra and adjacent to the Australian Institute of Sport, Canberra Stadium is a magnificent venue.

In a city renowned throughout the world for its careful planning, contemporary architecture and wonderful gardens, Canberra Stadium is a shining example of quality design and construction.

MATCH SCHEDULE			
Match	Date	Match	Venue
1	09/01/15	A1 v A4	Melbourne
2	10/01/15	B1 v B4	Sydney
3	10/01/15	B2 v B3	Brisbane
4	10/01/15	A2 v A3	Canberra
5	11/01/15	C1 v C4	Melbourne
6	11/01/15	C2 v C3	Canberra
7	12/01/15	D1 v D4	Newcastle
8	12/01/15	D2 v D3	Brisbane
9	13/01/15	A3 v A1	Sydney
10	13/01/15	A4 v A2	Canberra
11	14/01/15	B4 v B2	Melbourne
12	14/01/15	B3 v B1	Brisbane
13	15/01/15	C3 v C1	Sydney
14	15/01/15	C4 v C2	Canberra
15	16/01/15	D4 v D2	Melbourne
16	16/01/15	D3 v D1	Brisbane
17	17/01/15	A3 v A4	Newcastle
18	17/01/15	A1 v A2	Brisbane
19	18/01/15	B1 v B2	Melbourne
20	18/01/15	B3 v B4	Canberra
21	19/01/15	C3 v C4	Sydney
22	19/01/15	C1 v C2	Brisbane
23	20/01/15	D1 v D2	Melbourne
24	20/01/15	D3 v D4	Canberra
25	22/01/15	QF1 – A1 v B2	Melbourne
26	22/01/15	QF2 – B1 v A2	Brisbane
27	23/01/15	QF3 – C1 v D2	Sydney
28	23/01/15	QF4 – D1 v C2	Canberra
29	26/01/15	SF1 – QF1 v QF3	Sydney
30	27/01/15	SF2 – QF2 v QF4	Newcastle
31	30/01/15	Third Place Play-Off	Newcastle
32	31/01/15	Final	Sydney



Stadium Australia, Sydney

Capacity: 84,000

Purpose-built for the 2000 Sydney Olympics, Stadium Australia officially opened in June 1999 as the Socceroos played the FIFA World Stars. The Stadium has since hosted a number of Socceroos internationals, including the 2006 FIFA World Cup play-off against Uruguay in November 2005 as John Aloisi's penalty secured Australia a ticket to Germany.

Stadium Australia, which is located within Sydney Olympic Park at Homebush Bay and is 14km from central Sydney, most recently hosted Australia's 2-2 draw with Oman in the ongoing qualifying rounds for the FIFA World Cup Brazil 2014.



Brisbane Stadium, Brisbane

Capacity: 52,500

Since it was redeveloped by the Queensland Government in 2003, Brisbane Stadium has hosted football, rugby league and rugby union games as well as concerts. Home to A-League side Brisbane Roar, Brisbane Stadium has hosted the A-League Grand Final on two occasions.

The venue has also hosted FIFA World Cup and AFC Asian Cup qualifiers, a Super Rugby Grand Final, a Rugby League World Cup Final as well as numerous rugby internationals including nine games during the 2003 Rugby World Cup.

The playing surface has twice been voted best in the A-League, while the venue was recently upgraded.



Perfect Start For Saudi Arabia, Bahrain & UAE



Three-time champions Saudi Arabia along with regional rivals Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates made perfect starts to the qualifying campaign for the 2015 AFC Asian Cup as the race to secure a trip to Australia kicked off at the start of the year.

Saudi Arabia lost all three games at the last edition in Qatar having claimed the title in 1984, 1988 and 1996.

But with new coach Juan Ramon Lopez Caro at the helm, Saudi Arabia beat both former finalists China and Indonesia to top Group C with a 100% record.

After Frank Rijkaard departed following Saudi Arabia's failure to advance to the final round of qualifying for the 2014 FIFA World

Cup and group stage exit at the 2013 Gulf Cup, former Real Madrid coach Caro made the ideal start with a 2-1 win over China at the start of February following a second half winner from substitute Naif Hazazi in Dammam.

Yousef Al Salem then scored twice in Jakarta as Saudi Arabia came from behind to edge out Indonesia, 2-1 after the home side had taken an early lead through Boaz Solossa at the end of March.

And with Younus Mahmoud scoring the only goal midway through the second half as Iraq opened their campaign with a 1-0 win over Indonesia, before the 2007 champions lost 1-0 to China, Saudi Arabia sit three points clear at the top of the table with only two teams from each of the five

groups guaranteed qualification for the finals.

"We faced a strong team with an organised defence so we had to try to score from every angle," said former Real Madrid coach Caro following the win in Jakarta.

"We have many scoring options because we have skillful players who can play well individually and collectively. Indonesia's goal surprised us but we kept our composure and we turned the table.

"The group is very strong and very competitive. Each team wants to qualify and every match is a like a final. However, we should keep our feet on the ground and focus on our next match."

Defending champions Japan, hosts Australia and Korea Republic – who

finished third in the 2011 edition of the tournament – have all qualified automatically for the finals.

DPR Korea, winners of the 2012 AFC Challenge Cup, and the champions in the 2014 edition of the same competition will also feature at the finals.

Elsewhere, Bahrain also top Group D with a perfect record and a three point advantage after beating both Yemen and Qatar.

Faouzi Aaish and Saad Al Amer scored in the second half as Bahrain opened the campaign with a 2-0 win over Yemen.

Aaish was then again on target with the only goal after 20 minutes as Bahrain edged out 2011 hosts Qatar.

"We deserved the victory and we got an important win which will help us to continue

And Gulf Cup champions the UAE registered their perfect record in Group E after two games with wins over Vietnam and 2011 semi-finalists Uzbekistan.

Having claimed the Gulf Cup in January, the UAE began their AFC Asian Cup qualifying campaign with a 2-1 win in Vietnam thanks to goals in either half from Ahmed Khalil and Habib Al Fardan.

Khalil and Ali Mabkhout were then on target in the space of three second half minutes as the UAE came from behind to edge out Uzbekistan 2-1 in Abu Dhabi.

"We achieved what we wanted from the match against Uzbekistan. We played well in most periods of the game and we managed to make a good comeback thanks to a superb performance from Ismaeil

Hong Kong coach Kim Pan-gon, who was re-appointed in November after working with the national academy following the departure of Ernie Merrick.

"We are in a good position in the group and we should try to make new history for Hong Kong football. We have seven months until our next game, and if we prepare well again, we can make another surprise."

Elsewhere, three-time champions Iran top Group B with an unbeaten record alongside Kuwait following a 1-1 draw between the pair in March.

Iran had made a flying start to the campaign as Javad Nekounam scored a hat-trick to secure a 5-0 win over Lebanon, while Kuwait beat Thailand 3-1 in Bangkok. Masoud Shojaei scored on the stroke

our campaign successfully," said Bahrain coach Gabriel Calderon.

"We deserved to score more than one goal but we missed several scoring chances although the most important thing is that we got the three points.

"We controlled the first period before Qatar managed to control the proceedings in the second period. We made some tactical changes and this helped us to regain control, although our players failed to score from the chances that we created."

Khalifan Ibrahim and Yusef Ahmed had scored as Qatar began the campaign with a 2-0 home win over Malaysia, who later bounced back as Khayri Muhymeen scored with two minutes remaining to edge out Yemen 2-1 in Kuala Lumpur.

Matar," said UAE coach Mahdi Ali.

"We proved that we don't rely on one player and we had a good team work. After we went behind in the first half, we managed to return in the second period and we achieved a good result from a tough match against a strong opponent."

Hong Kong surprisingly sit in second place in Group E after following on their impressive goalless draw with Uzbekistan in Tashkent by edging out Vietnam 1-0 at home thanks to a late header from captain Chan Wai Ho.

"I am proud of the players and all the coaches. They tried their best to follow my instructions and I am really happy to see we played as a team. We did not always use our skill, but our strong mentality," said

of half-time as Iran took the lead in Kuwait City only for Fahad Awad to equalise for the hosts with 14 minutes remaining.

"We started the game with a cautious approach as we wanted to stop the enthusiasm of our opponents who had the advantage of playing at home in front of their fans," said Iran coach Carlos Queiroz following the draw with Kuwait.

"We managed to take the lead at the end of the first half and we continued with our good performance in the second half although a defensive mistake gave Kuwait the chance to equalise with a penalty.

"We are still at the start of the qualifiers and the chance is open for all the teams in the group."

Despite being on the back foot for much



The Asahi Shimbun AJW

KEEPING AN EYE ON ASIA AND JAPAN



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of the first half, Iran took the lead just before half-time when Shojaei capitalised on some sloppy defending to put his side ahead.

But Kuwait stepped up the pressure in the second half and they were rewarded when Awad kept his cool to convert from the penalty spot following a foul on Abdulhadi Khamee by captain Nekounam.

"We were the better side in the first half but our forwards did not have their best day and they missed several chances. But at the same time we didn't deserve to concede a goal because we were the better side," said Kuwait coach Goran Tufegdizic.

"We made some changes in the second half and we increased our attacking options in order to get back into the game. We managed to score the equaliser but we needed more concentration and luck to get the three points."

Lebanon, meanwhile, were able to bounce back from their opening day setback against Iran with a 5-2 win over Thailand thanks to two first half goals from Hassan Chaito.

Finally in Group A, Jordan and Oman lead the way after the pair recorded respective wins over Singapore and Syria at the start of February.

Ahmad Hayel scored twice as Jordan beat Singapore 4-0, while a first half strike from Abdulaziz Al Maqbali proved the difference as Oman edged out Syria by a single goal with the second round of matches in Group A moved back until August.

"The win will give us a lot of confidence before the next important matches," said Jordan coach Adnan Hamad.

"We had a good performance on the attacking level and we didn't play with a defensive formation. I'm happy that our strikers created some chances and scored tonight."

"We are happy that our new players who are taking part in these kinds of matches for the first time had a good game. We now have good substitutes that we can use and this will help us to change the game plan."

"I hope that the good start will be a good motivation to qualify to the Asian Cup finals."

Group A

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Jordan	1	1	0	0	4	0	4	3
Oman	1	1	0	0	1	0	1	3
Syria	1	0	0	1	0	1	-1	0
Singapore	1	0	0	1	0	4	-4	0

06/02/13

Oman 1 (Abdulaziz Al Maqbali 34) Syria 0

Jordan 4 (Abdullah Hayel 18, Khalid Al-Najdi 52, Ahmad Hayel 55, 74) Singapore 0

Group B

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
I.R. Iran	2	1	1	0	6	1	5	4
Kuwait	2	1	1	0	4	2	2	4
Lebanon	2	1	0	1	5	7	-2	3
Thailand	2	0	0	2	3	8	-5	0

06/02/13

I.R. Iran 5 (Kazem Ghosseinifard 26, 62, Javad Nekounam 45+1, 61, 88) Lebanon 0

Thailand 1 (Chenwathip Songkrut) Kuwait 3 (Wahneem Benmouh 25 OG, Hassan Fathi 58, Hassan Awan 65)

22/03/13

Lebanon 5 (Hassan Chaito 6, 22, Mohammad Nader 31, Hassan Marouk 72, Abbas Ali Abi 90+1) Thailand 2 (Wutiphan Puangjan 49, 85)

26/03/13

Kuwait 1 (Jihad Awad 76) I.R. Iran 1 (Mehdi Mahdavi 45)

Group C

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Saudi Arabia	2	2	0	0	4	2	2	6
China P.R.	2	1	0	1	2	2	0	3
Iraq	2	1	0	1	1	1	0	3
Indonesia	2	0	0	2	1	3	-2	0

06/02/13

Iraq 1 (Youssef Mahdoud 66) Indonesia 0

Saudi Arabia 2 (Fahad Al-Muwallad 23, Naf' Hassan 77)

China P.R. 1 (Zhang Jun 29)

22/03/13

China P.R. 1 (Yu Dabao 90+3) Iraq 0

23/03/13

Indonesia 1 (Bakar Setiawan 5) Saudi Arabia 2 (Raseef Al-Saleh 14, 55)

Group D

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Bahrain	2	2	0	0	3	0	3	6
Qatar	2	1	0	1	2	1	1	3
Malaysia	2	1	0	1	2	3	-1	3
Yemen	2	0	0	2	1	4	-3	0

06/02/13

Yemen 0 Bahrain 2 (Fahad Al-Saleh 49, Saad Al-Amer 85)

Qatar 2 (Khalid Ibrahim 55, Yusuf Ahmed 90+3) Malaysia 0

22/03/13

Malaysia 2 (Azwanuddin Azli 27, Mohd Ali Yusoff 88)

Yemen 1 (Ahmed Al-Haghi 12)

Bahrain 1 (Fahad Al-Saleh 28) Qatar 0

Nepal 0 Palestine 0

Group E

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
UAE	2	2	0	0	4	2	2	6
Hong Kong	2	1	1	0	1	0	1	4
Uzbekistan	2	0	1	1	1	2	-1	1
Vietnam	2	0	0	2	1	3	-2	0

06/02/13

Uzbekistan 0 Hong Kong 0

Vietnam 1 (Phong Quang Anh 58) United Arab Emirates 2

(Ahmed Khalil 6, Nabil Al-Jordan 67)

22/03/13

Hong Kong 1 (Chau Wai Ho 87) Vietnam 0

United Arab Emirates 2 (Ahmed Khalil 58, Ali Makhadmeh 62)

Uzbekistan 1 (Shakhri Gadoev 16)



ACL Battle Commences

Two rounds into the group stage of the 2013 AFC Champions League and Emperor's Cup winners Kashiwa Reysol, last year's runners-up Al Ahli from Saudi Arabia and Uzbekistan ever-present Pakhtakor retain the tournament's only remaining perfect records.

Brazilian midfielder Leandro Domingues scored twice as Kashiwa maintained their 100% start with a 3-1 comeback win over Australia's Central Coast Mariners in Group H to follow their 1-0 opening day win over China's Guizhou Renhe.

Patrick Zwaanswijk's early header had given Central Coast the ideal start at Hitachi Stadium only for Leandro to hit back for Reysol either side of a strike from Kenta Kano for Nelsinho Baptista's side.

"We gave away the opener soon after the start, but we stayed calm to make the game and went on good counter attacks after winning the ball," said Nelsinho. "With this win, we have collected our second win in this group and that has helped us get closer to qualifying for the next stage."

With Guizhou holding Suwon Bluewings to a goalless draw in Korea Republic, Kashiwa moved four points clear of the K-League Classic side at the top of Group H.

In Dubai, Oman striker Amad Al Hosni scored twice as 2012 finalists Al Ahli also came from behind to edge out 10-man Al Nasr 2-1 in Group C.

Al Hosni struck twice in the first half either side of the dismissal of Al Nasr captain Leo Lima after Japanese striker Takayuki Morimoto had opened the scoring for the UAE Pro League side.

"The players played well and fought to get back into the game and they deserve the result," said Al Ahli coach Aleksander Ilic, who replaced Karel Jradlim following last month's 2-0 win over Qatar's Al Gharafa.

"We faced a strong team who took the lead,

but we had determination to get back into the game and win the match."

And with former France international striker Djibril Cisse scoring twice as Al Gharafa also came back from being a goal behind to hand Iran champions Sepahan a 3-1 defeat, Al Ahli remain three points clear at the top of the table.

Pakhtakor, meanwhile, moved two points clear at the top of Group B as Jamshid Isakanderov scored with five minutes remaining as the Uzbekistan champions maintained their perfect start to their 11th consecutive AFC Champions League campaign with a 1-0 win over Al Shabab Al Arabi in Dubai.

And second placed Lekhwiya returned from



their trip to Saudi Arabia with their unbeaten record still intact after the Qatar champions shared a goalless draw with Al Ettifaq, who picked up their first point of the campaign following February's 1-0 defeat in Tashkent.

Elsewhere, unbeaten Iranian Hazfi Cup winners Esteghlal moved a point clear at the top of a tightly contested Group D after Jilloyd Samuel and Farhad Majidi scored in the second half to secure a 2-0 win over UAE Pro League leaders Al Ain.

Saudi Arabia's Al Hilal also kick-started their campaign as Yasser Al Qahtani netted a second half brace to earn the two-time continental champions a 3-1 win over Qatar's Al Rayyan to

join Al Ain in second place.

In Group A, Iran Pro League runners-up Tractorsazi and Saudi Arabia champions Al Shabab remained three points clear at the top of the table after maintaining their unbeaten records.

Substitute Gailson scored in the dying minutes as Tractorsazi Tabriz earned a thrilling 3-3 draw with Qatar's El Jaish, while fellow Matchday One winners Al Shabab were forced to settle for a 1-1 against Al Jazira as Khamis Esmaeel's spectacular second half strike earned the home side a first point of the campaign.

In the East, J-League champions Sanfrecce Hiroshima suffered a serious blow to their hopes of progressing to the Round of 16 as Beijing Guoan recorded a 2-1 win in Group G.

Piao Cheng netted the decisive goal with 11 minutes remaining in Beijing as the Chinese Super League side built on February's draw with Pohang Steelers in Korea to join Bunyodkor two points clear at the top of the table.

Following a second consecutive defeat, Sanfrecce find themselves two points adrift at the foot of the table after substitute Kamoliddin Murzoev netted with the last kick of the game to earn 2012 semi-finalists Bunyodkor a 2-2 draw with former champions Pohang.

In Group F, Brazilian striker Muriqui earned Chinese Super League champions Guangzhou Evergrande a 1-1 draw with Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors and former winners Urawa Reds scored three goals in 15 second half minutes to seal a comfortable 4-1 win over 10-man Muangthong United.

Finally in Group E, FC Seoul shared a goalless draw with Buriram United in Thailand, while China's Jiangsu Sainty were held by the same scoreline at home to Japan's Vegalta Sendai to leave the K-League champions two points clear at the top of the table.



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Tractorsazi (IRN)	2	1	1	0	6	4	2	4	Pakhtakor (UZB)	2	2	0	0	2	0	2	6	Al Ahil (KSA)	2	2	0	0	4	1	3	6	Esteghlal (IRN)	2	1	1	0	5	3	2	4	FC Seoul (KOR)	2	1	1	0	5	1	4	4	Guangzhou (CHN)	2	1	1	0	4	1	3	4	Bunyodkor (UZB)	2	1	1	0	4	2	2	4	Kashiwa (JPN)	2	2	0	0	4	1	3	6																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																									
Al Shabab (KSA)	2	1	1	0	3	1	2	4	Lekhwiya (QAT)	2	1	1	0	2	1	1	4	Al Gharafa (QAT)	2	1	0	1	3	3	0	3	Al Ain (UAE)	2	1	0	1	3	3	0	3	Vegalta (JPN)	2	0	2	0	1	1	0	2	Urawa (JPN)	2	1	0	1	3	3	0	2	Beijing (CHN)	2	1	1	0	2	1	1	4	Suwon (KOR)	2	0	2	0	0	0	0	2	Guizhou (CHN)	2	0	1	1	0	1	-1	1	Central Coast (AUS)	2	0	1	1	1	3	-2	1																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																							
El Jaish (QAT)	2	0	1	1	3	5	-2	1	El Ettifaq (KSA)	2	0	1	1	0	1	-1	1	Sepahan (IRN)	2	1	0	1	4	3	0	3	Al Hilal (KSA)	2	1	0	1	4	4	0	3	Buriram (THA)	2	0	2	0	1	1	0	2	Jeonbuk (KOR)	2	0	2	0	3	3	0	2	Pohang (KOR)	2	0	2	0	2	2	0	2	Hiroshima (JPN)	2	0	0	2	1	4	-3	0																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																																									</



Holders Kuwait SC Flex Their Muscles

AFC Cup champions Kuwait Sports Club sent out an ominous message to anyone with designs on their crown as Marín Ion's side kicked off the defence of the title with back-to-back victories in Group A of the 2013 campaign.

Kuwait SC, who downed Iraqi side Arbil in the final last season, followed up an opening day 2-0 win over Al Riffa in Bahrain with a comfortable 3-1 win over Lebanese side Safa to stand three points clear of the Bahrainis after the opening two rounds of matches.

"It was an important victory tonight although the performance was not as we expected," said Ion. "We had good chances and we should have scored more goals but the players were tired and the most important thing is that we achieved the three points."

The champions were one of eight teams to win their first two fixtures in this year's competition as the clubs hoping to battle it out for the title emerged from the pack early in proceedings.

Oman's Fanja and Arbil from Iraq lead the way in Group B with both clubs securing wins over Yemen's Ahli Taiz and Al Ansar of Lebanon to give themselves strong hopes of securing places in the Round of 16 early.

The same applies in Group F, where New Radiant from the Maldives and Myanmar's Yangon United also have secured consecutive wins – against Sunray Cave JC Sun Hei of Hong Kong and Indonesia's Persibo – to sit with perfect records in the competition so far.

New Radiant's 7-0 thrashing of Persibo in the Indonesian city of Solo was the biggest winning margin in the competition so far and coach Velizar Popov was delighted with his team's performance.

"I am proud of my players who struggled

hard to win the game by a big score," said the Bulgarian. "This is the biggest victory that we have had outside the Maldives and it came about because our players showed tremendous discipline throughout the game."

"It is a great victory for the whole team and



for our officials and supporters and the entire Maldivian community."

Dhofar of Oman have taken the early lead in Group C, securing a 3-2 win over former champions Al Faisaly from Jordan in the first game of the competition in Amman before picking up three points with a 1-0 win over

Yemen's Al Shabab Club to sit three points clear of second placed Duhok of Iraq.

In Group D, meanwhile, Al Shorta from Syria picked up wins against Kuwait's Al Qadsia – finalists in 2010 – and tournament debutants FC Ravshan from Tajikistan to sit three points clear of Al Qadsia and Jordan's Al Ramtha.

"It was a wonderful victory as it came after the effort that the players gave on the pitch," said Al Shorta coach Mohamad Al Shaded after his side's win over FC Ravshan. "Our players controlled the match throughout the two periods and we successfully transformed our dominance into goals."

Hong Kong champions Kitchee stand at the summit of Group E thanks to their wins over India's Churchill Brothers and Warriors FC – previously known as Singapore Armed Forces – in the opening two match days, with Indonesia's Semen Padang in second, two points behind after victory over Warriors was followed by a 2-2 draw in Pune against Churchill Brothers.

SHB Da Nang's perfect start sees them sit atop Group G following victories over Ayeyawady United from Myanmar and Maziya Sports & Recreation from the Maldives, with Malaysian champions Kelantan in second, two points behind with the top two due to face off on Matchday Three.

Vietnam's Sai Gon Xuan Thanh lead Group H, the only team to lead their section without a perfect record, sitting above India's East Bengal by virtue of more goals scored with both teams on four points.

Sai Gon kicked off with a 3-2 win over Singapore's Tampines Rovers before being held to a 3-3 draw with Selangor while East Bengal's 1-0 win over the Malaysians was followed by a scoreless draw in Ho Chi Minh City.



Group Stage															
Group A								Group B							
	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/- Pts		P	W	D	L	F	A	+/- Pts
Kuwait SC (KUW)	2	2	0	0	5	1	4 6	Fanja (OMA)	2	2	0	0	6	0	6 6
Al Riffa (BHR)	2	1	0	1	3	2	1 3	Arbil (IRQ)	2	2	0	0	6	0	6 6
Safa SC (LIB)	2	0	1	1	2	4	-2 1	Ahli Taiz SC (YEM)	2	0	0	2	0	6	-6 0
Raggar-Tadaz (TJK)	2	0	1	1	1	4	-3 1	Al Ansar (LIB)	2	0	0	2	0	6	-6 0
06/03/13															
Safa SC 1 (Ahmed Al-Mansoori 1) Raggar-Tadaz 1 (Kamil Sadev 68)								Arbil 4 (Luay Saleh 43, 89+2, Tarek Bakayev 68, Anwar Badhi 78) Ahli Taiz SC 0							
Al Riffa 0 Kuwait SC 2 (Zagrebko 8, Abdullah Al-Banaki 89)								Fanja 4 (Jdy Cisse 6, Mohamed Mahabib 54, Mohamed Al-Masburi 80, Gontarev 88) Al Ansar 0							
12/03/13															
Raggar-Tadaz 0 Al Riffa 3 (Ahmed Al-Dosari 15, 45, 88) Kuwait SC 3 (Abdullah Al-Banaki 11, 52, Zagrebko 68) Safa SC 1 (Amir Khan 15)								Ahli Taiz SC 0 Fanja 2 (Jdy Cisse 28, Mohamed Al-Masburi 34) Al Ansar 0 Arbil 2 (Luay Saleh 27, Anwar Badhi 59)							

Group Stage															
Group C								Group D							
	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/- Pts		P	W	D	L	F	A	+/- Pts
Dhofar Club (OMA)	2	2	0	0	4	2	2 6	Al Shorta (SYR)	2	2	0	0	3	0	3 6
Al Faisaly (JOR)	2	1	0	1	3	3	0 3	Al Qadisia (KUW)	2	1	0	1	3	1	2 3
Duhok (IRQ)	2	1	0	1	3	2	1 3	Al Ramtha (JOR)	2	1	0	1	1	3	-2 3
Al Shab (YEM)	2	0	0	2	1	4	-3 0	FC Ravshan (TJK)	2	0	0	2	0	3	-3 0
06/03/13															
Al Shab IBB Club 0 Duhok 0								FC Ravshan 0 Al Ramtha 1 (Majid Al-Hakmani 68)							
Al Faisaly 2 (Tamer Hag Muhammad 58, Abdullah Al-Aster 87) Dhofar Club 3 (Jawad Al-Naghi 4, Jod Lomali 23, 44)								Al Qadisia 0 Al Shorta 1 (Mehar Al-Said 90+3)							
13/03/13															
Duhok 0 Al Faisaly 1 (Tamer Hag Muhammad 90+2) Dhofar Club 1 (Jod Lomali 90+3) Al Shab IBB Club 0								Al Shorta 2 (Ali Ghuloum 53, Qusayr Habib 58) FC Ravshan 0							
								Al Ramtha 0 Al Qadisia 3 (Mamad Nadi 2, Saleh Al-Shukhi 28, Badar Al-Muttra 78)							

Group Stage															
Group E								Group F							
	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/- Pts		P	W	D	L	F	A	+/- Pts
Kitchee (HKG)	2	2	0	0	7	2	5 6	N.Radiant (MDV)	2	2	0	0	8	0	8 6
S.Padang (IDN)	2	1	1	0	5	3	2 4	Yangon (MYA)	2	2	0	0	6	1	5 6
Churchill (IND)	2	0	1	1	2	5	-3 1	Sun Hei (HKG)	2	0	0	2	1	4	-3 0
Warriors FC (SIN)	2	0	0	2	3	7	-4 0	Persibo (IDN)	2	0	0	2	0	10	-10 0
26/02/13															
Kitchee 3 (Che Siu Ki 26, Jerri Tanno 31, 86) Churchill Brothers 0								26/02/13							
Semen Padang 3 (Djihad Wilase 28, Tanvir Mulya 32, Muhammad Nur Iskandar 88) Warriors FC 1 (Tosaro Devi 41)								Yangon United 3 (Adnan Kone 56, 63 90+2) Persibo 0							
12/03/13								New Radiant SC 1 (Omar Mohamed 67) Sunray Cave JC Sun Hei 0							
Churchill Brothers 2 (Javed Chohan 27, Abhinav Singh 57)								12/03/13							
Semen Padang 2 (Hendro Adi Bayura 36, Muhammad Riaz 44)								Persibo 0 New Radiant SC 7 (Omar Mohamed 11, Julyay Ali 14, 50, 56, 70, 88, Ali Omar 88)							
Warriors FC 2 (Tosaro Devi 23, Druan Gassem 28) Kitchee 4 (Jerri Tanno 48, Si, Lo Ayan 58+2, Cheng Siu Wai 75)								Sunray Cave JC Sun Hei 1 (Doung Chu Lun 28) Yangon United 3 (Adnan Kone 2, Cesar 53, Aung Mye 89+7)							

Group Stage															
Group G								Group H							
	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/- Pts		P	W	D	L	F	A	+/- Pts
SHB Da Nang (VIE)	2	2	0	0	5	3	2 6	Sai Gon (VIE)	2	1	1	0	3	2	1 4
Kelantan (MAS)	2	1	1	0	4	2	2 4	East Bengal (IND)	2	1	1	0	1	0	1 4
Maziya (MDV)	2	0	1	1	3	4	-1 1	Tampines (SIN)	2	0	1	1	5	6	-1 1
Ayeyawady (MYA)	2	0	0	2	2	5	-3 0	Selangor (MAS)	2	0	1	1	3	4	-1 1
27/02/13															
SHB Da Nang 2 (Gao Subin 43, Sebastian Merlo 53) Ayeyawady United 1 (Nay Lin Tin 63)								27/02/13							
Kelantan 1 (Rafael Rado 77) Maziya Sports & Recreation 1 (Husein Adhuhum 62)								East Bengal 1 (Lalchand Raut 43) Selangor 0							
								Tampines Rovers 2 (Ruslan Amir 88, Aleksander Duric 90+2) Sai Gon Xuan Thanh 3 (Cherwan Anangsu 22, 62, Pham Thue Chi 84)							
13/03/13															
Ayeyawady United 1 (Dawson Bernyok 79) Kelantan 3 (Badri Rado 2, Dintomas Perinco 53, 80)								13/03/13							
Maziya Sports & Recreation 2 (Abdulla Asaithula 33, Ahmad Nashed 81) SHB Da Nang 3 (Danny Mirnanda 54, Sebastian Merlo 66, Nguyen Minh Huong 80)								Sai Gon Xuan Thanh 0 East Bengal 0							
								Selangor 3 (Francis Doe 8, 54, Mohd Asri Mahipal 48)							
								Tampines Rovers 3 (Aleksander Duric 20, Muhammad Isman Sahib 49, Nandoro Nanyusha 71)							

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Jordan Delay Japan Celebrations

Japan's hopes of celebrating qualification for the 2014 FIFA World Cup finals were put on hold at the end of March as Alberto Zaccheroni's Asian Cup champions suffered a 2-1 defeat by Jordan.

Khalil Ateyah handed Adnan Hamad's side the lead before a fine solo effort by Ahmad Ibrahim set the home side up for a win that sees Jordan, who lost 0-0 to Japan at the start of the campaign, jump from the bottom of Group B up to second place.

Manchester United midfielder Shinji Kagawa pulled one back for the visitors but a missed penalty by Yasuhiro Endo deprived Japan of the opportunity to level the scores and pick up the point needed to become the first side to qualify for the 2014 finals.

But a draw in either of their final two matches – against Australia at Saitama Stadium or against Iraq in Doha in June – will still guarantee Japan's progress, while Jordan's hopes of playing at their first ever FIFA World Cup are well and truly alive with games against Australia and Oman remaining.

The visit of Australia to Saitama Stadium on June 4 had already been made significantly more important after the 2011 AFC Asian Cup finalists fought back from two goals down to rescue a thrilling 2-2 draw with Oman in Sydney.

Abdulaziz Al Maqbali's early strike and an own goal from Mile Jedinak had put Paul Le Guen's Oman on course for a second win in Group B having shared a goalless draw with Australia in Muscat in June at the start of the campaign.

But after an inspired Tim Cahill hit back for Australia, Brett Holman's vicious strike with five minutes remaining saw Australia remain level on points with Oman in third place with

the pair having picked up a win and three draws, although Holger Osieck's side have a game in hand.

"We had a very poor first half and we played too slowly, the penetrating ball never came and we stayed in front of them. We knew they would have had that shape," said Australia coach Osieck.

"There was the goal, which was unnecessary and came from a very poor set-up in our defensive line but that happened and we had some clear stuff during half-time. We had to



improve but we had a very unfortunate own goal, that was unnecessary and again we knew they would play that way. There were three players at the near post and Mile was the unlucky one.

"In the second half at least we could show a lot of spirit and I have to give credit to our experienced players, they changed it around. Tim Cahill was a threat throughout and with a bit of luck we could have scored again."

Elsewhere, AFC Asian Cup semi-finalists Uzbekistan remained a point clear of Korea Republic at the top of Group A after captain Server Djeparov struck midway through the

second half as Mirjalol Kasimov's side secured a third consecutive win of the final round after edging out Lebanon 1-0 in Tashkent.

With Korea earlier claiming a dramatic 2-1 win over Qatar to temporarily move clear at the top of Group A, Djeparov's deflected strike extended Uzbekistan's unbeaten run to five games.

Both second-place Korea, who are just a point off the pace, and third-place Iran, who sit a further three points adrift, still have a game in hand on Uzbekistan ahead of the completion of the final round in June, while Lebanon's hopes of a maiden FIFA World Cup appearance are all but over after suffering a fourth defeat of the campaign.

At Seoul World Cup Stadium, SV Hamburg winger Son Heung-min came off the bench to score a dramatic late winner as Korea handed Qatar an agonising 2-1 defeat.

Son started on the bench but popped up six minutes into injury time at the end of the game to roll the ball home from close range after Lee Dong-gook's shot had looped up and onto the crossbar.

The game looked to be headed for a draw after former AFC Player of the Year Khalifa Ibrahim had scored from outside the area for the Qataris just three minutes after Lee Keun-ho – the 2012 AFC Player of the Year – had put Choi Kang-hee's side in front.

"It was a dramatic victory," said Korea coach Choi Kang-hee. "Our players kept going right until the end and were rewarded with victory. Because of the manner of victory, that gives the camp a lift going into the final games."

"We know what we have to do to get to the World Cup and our desire to get there is strong. We have some rebuilding to do but at the moment the focus is on qualification."



Group A										Group B									
	P	W	D	L	GF	GA	GD	Pts			P	W	D	L	GF	GA	GD	Pts	
03/06/12 Uzbekistan 0 I.R. Iran 1 (Mohammad Reza Khalafouri 90+3) Lebanon 0 Qatar 1 (Sebastian Soria 64)										03/06/12 Jordan 1 (Ahmad Hayel 43) Iraq 1 (Nahat Akram 14) Japan 3 (Keisuke Honda 11, Ryoichi Maeda 51, Shinji Kagawa 54) Oman 0									
08/06/12 Qatar 1 (Yusef Ahmed 22) Korea Republic 4 (Lee Keun-ho 26, 80, Kwak Tae-hwi 55, Kim Shin-wook 64) Lebanon 1 (Ali Al-Saadi 34) Uzbekistan 1 (Jasur Hasanov 12)										08/06/12 Oman 0 Australia 0 Japan 6 (Ryoichi Maeda 18, Keisuke Honda 22, 31, 53, Shinji Kagawa 35, Yuto Kiritani 89) Jordan 0									
Uzbekistan	6	3	2	1	6	4	2	11		Japan	6	4	1	1	14	4	10	13	
Korea Republic	5	3	1	1	11	5	6	10		Jordan	6	2	1	3	6	12	-6	7	
I.R. Iran	5	2	1	2	2	2	0	7		Australia	5	1	3	1	6	6	0	6	
Qatar	6	2	1	3	4	7	-3	7		Oman	6	1	3	2	6	9	-3	6	
12/06/12 Korea Republic 3 (Kim Bo-kyung 30, 47, Koo Ja-cheol 90) Lebanon 0 I.R. Iran 0 Qatar 0										Iraq	5	1	2	2	4	5	-1	5	
11/09/12 Lebanon 1 (Badr Antar 27) I.R. Iran 0 Uzbekistan 2 (Ki Sung-yueng 13 OG, Sanjar Tursunov 59) Korea Republic 2 (Artem Filipov 44 OG, Lee Dong-gook 57)										11/09/12 Japan 1 (Ryoichi Maeda 25) Iraq 0 Jordan 2 (Hasan Abdel Fattah 50, Amer Deeb 73) Australia 1 (Archie Thompson 86)									
04/06/12 Lebanon v Korea Republic Qatar v I.R. Iran										16/10/12 Oman 2 (Ahmad Mubarak 62, Juma Al-Masbahi 87) Jordan 1 (Thaqer Basab 90)									
11/06/12 I.R. Iran v Lebanon Korea Republic v Uzbekistan										26/03/12 Australia 2 (Tim Cahill 52, Brett Holman 85) Oman 2 (Abdulaziz Al Maqbali 6, Mile Jedinak OG 49) Jordan 2 (Khalil Ateyah 45+1, Ahmad Ibrahim 60) Japan 1 (Shinji Kagawa 69)									
18/06/12 Uzbekistan v Qatar Korea Republic v I.R. Iran										04/06/12 Japan v Australia Oman v Iraq									
										11/06/12 Iraq v Japan Australia v Jordan									
										18/06/12 Jordan v Oman Australia v Iraq									

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Group A

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Myanmar	3	2	1	0	7	1	6	7
India	3	2	0	1	6	2	4	6
Guam	3	1	0	2	3	9	-6	3
Chinese Taipei	3	0	1	2	2	6	-4	1

India 2 (Javed Raja Shukla 40, Robin Singh 60) Chinese Taipei 1 (Lee Tai-De 54) HT: 1-0
Myanmar 5 (Seo Min Co 26, Kyi Lin 40 pen, Pyaw Mye Aung 45+2, Pui Soe 58, Kyaw Zayar Win 80) Guam 0 HT: 3-0
Guam 0 India 4 (Javed Raja Shukla 44, 80+1, Clifford Mawula 68, Javed Raja Shukla 79) HT: 0-0
Chinese Taipei 1 (Lee Ming-shian 88 pen) Myanmar 1 (Seo Kyaw Kyaw 18) HT: 0-1
Chinese Taipei 0 Guam 3 (Jason Cudde 15, 79, Ian Atkinson 54) HT: 0-1
Myanmar 1 (Seo Min Co 75) India 0 HT: 0-0

Group B

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Kyrgyzstan	3	3	0	0	3	0	3	9
Tajikistan	3	2	0	1	4	1	3	6
Pakistan	3	1	0	2	2	2	0	3
Macau	3	0	0	3	0	6	-6	0

Tajikistan 1 (Abdumurod Khondok 84) Pakistan 0 HT: 0-0
Kyrgyzstan 1 (David Tishch 45+1) Macau 0 HT: 1-0
Macau 0 Tajikistan 3 (Jasurbek Isomov 56, 80+2, Jakhongir Ergashev 82) HT: 0-0
Pakistan 0 Kyrgyzstan 1 (David Tishch 2) HT: 0-1
Pakistan 2 (Husain Darfur 44 pen, Kalsoom Ullah 70) Macau 0 HT: 1-0
Kyrgyzstan 1 (David Tishch 41) Tajikistan 0 HT: 1-0

Group C

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Afghanistan	3	2	1	0	3	1	2	7
Laos	3	1	2	0	6	4	2	5
Sri Lanka	3	1	0	2	5	5	0	3
Mongolia	3	0	1	2	1	5	-4	1

Afghanistan 1 (Bakht Anwar 45) Sri Lanka 0 HT: 1-0
Laos 1 (Vithayakorn Sanyasirakul 33) Mongolia 1 (Timurjargal Tsedenbal 45+2) HT: 1-1
Mongolia 0 Afghanistan 1 (Bakht Anwar 59) HT: 0-0
Sri Lanka 2 (Chamika Mathipannalage 74, Peris Chandana 81) Laos 4 (Souk Aphane Vongchithphane 31 pen, Vilaynor Sanyasirakul 47, Vongphavich Sanyasirakul 71, Sangnuek Phommavong 77) HT: 0-1
Sri Lanka 3 (Peris Chandana 55, Mahesh Magoon 54, 88) Mongolia 0 HT: 0-0
Laos 1 (Khamphong Sayanath 30) Afghanistan 1 (Sardar Mohammad Ahmad 58) HT: 1-0

Group D

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Palestine	3	2	1	0	10	0	10	7
Bangladesh	3	2	0	1	6	1	5	6
Nepal	3	1	1	1	6	2	4	4
Northern Mariana	3	0	0	3	0	19	-19	0

Palestine 1 (Haytham Thabit 78) Bangladesh 0 HT: 0-0
Nepal 6 (Akmal Khan 4, 42, 72, Santosh Shukthale 80, Raju Timang 60 pen, Sanjay Rai 68) Northern Mariana 0 HT: 3-0
Northern Mariana 0 Palestine 9 (Khalid Saleh 7, 28, 82, Abdulmalik Alshakhi 21, 27, Alaa Atya 23, 80+1, Haytham Thabit 88, Yusef Ghazwan 85)
Bangladesh 2 (Shakibur Rany 28 pen, 57) Nepal 0 HT: 1-0
Bangladesh 4 (Abdusalam Taha Ahmed 2, 83, Shakibur Rany 37, Mahamud Loken 86) Northern Mariana 0 HT: 2-0
Nepal 0 Palestine 0

Group E

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Philippines	2	2	0	0	9	0	9	6
Turkmenistan	2	1	0	1	7	1	6	3
Cambodia	2	0	0	2	0	15	-15	0

Turkmenistan 7 (Arslanovzat Ananyev 2, Vladimir Kopylov 25, 38, Ota Taziev 41 OG, Shamsiddin Bayli 74, Guseinbek Abdyl 81, Garibagdi Isayev 87) Cambodia 0 HT: 4-0
Cambodia 0 Philippines 8 (Phil Younghusband 26, 31, 34, 88, Javier Pato 45, 58, Stephen Schrick 46, Margo Martens 80) HT: 0-4
Philippines 1 (Phil Younghusband 67) Turkmenistan 0 HT: 0-0



Challenge Cup Line-Up Finalised

The line-up for the finals of the AFC Challenge Cup was confirmed at the end of March as Afghanistan, Myanmar, the Philippines, Kyrgyzstan and Palestine won their qualifying groups to progress to the decisive stage of the competition later in the year.

The quintet join the Maldives, who will host the finals next year, while Laos and Turkmenistan also qualified by virtue of claiming the two best runners-up berths in the five qualifying groups.

Afghanistan qualified for the finals for the first time since 2008, winning Group C ahead of Laos with two wins and a draw that saw the nation secure seven points and claim top spot by two points from the Laotians.

Myanmar, meanwhile, booked their first trip to the finals since 2010 by finishing in first place in Group A, with Seo Min Co scoring the only goal of the game in his side's 1-0 win over India 15 minutes from time to ensure qualification.

The result means India, winners in 2008, will miss out on the finals.

The Philippines continue their rise within Asian football by booking their place in the Maldives, with Phil Younghusband in devastating form for

the South East Asian side.

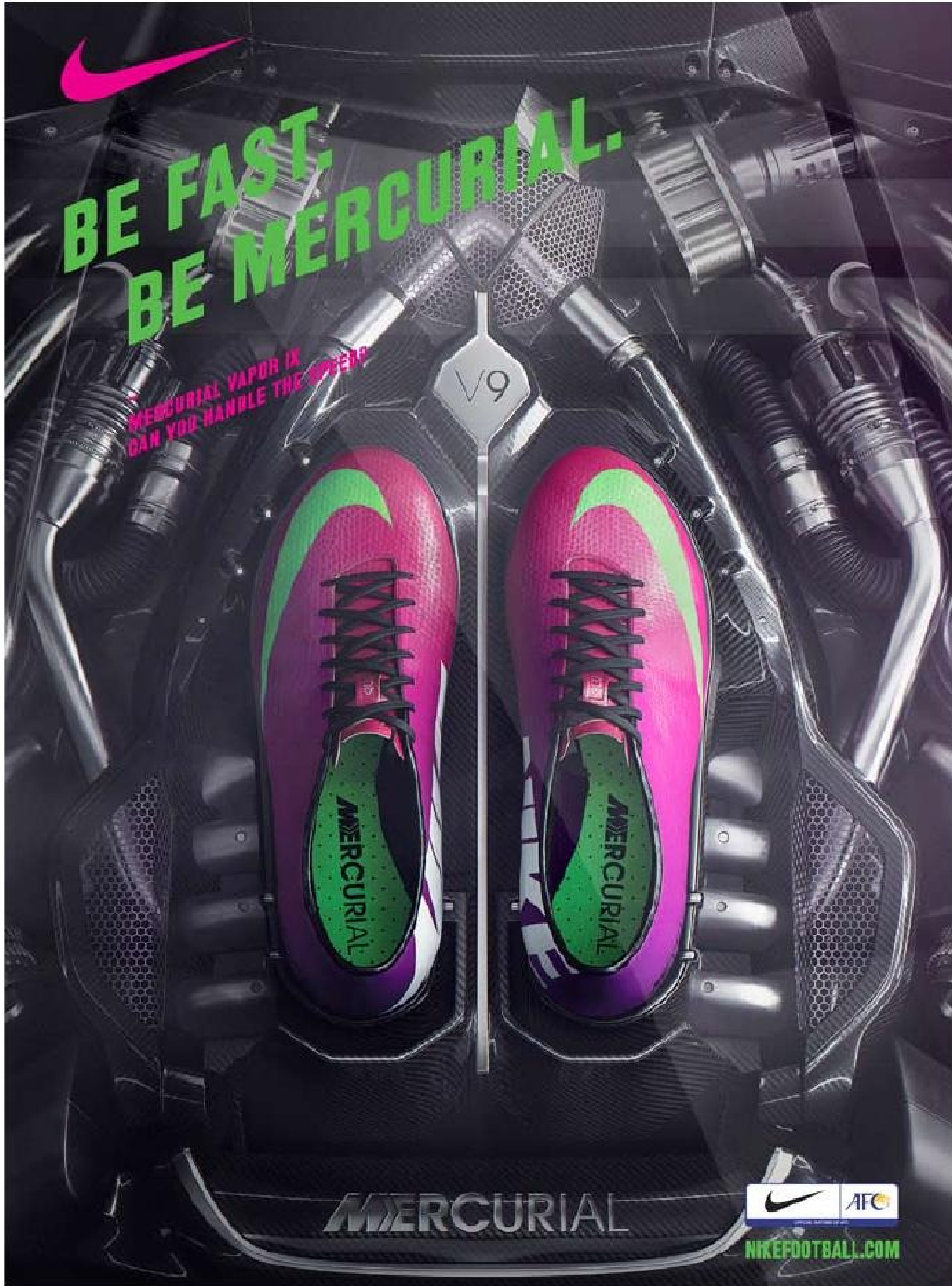
The former Chelsea trainee scored five times in total in the group stage, featuring four strikes against Cambodia and the winner in the 1-0 success over Turkmenistan - the beaten finalists in the 2012 tournament.

Kyrgyzstan emerged from Group B with a perfect record against Tajikistan, Pakistan and Macau, while Palestine also return to the finals after topping Group D ahead of Bangladesh, Nepal and Northern Marianas Islands.

The non-participation of Brunei in Group E, meanwhile, meant that the results of the matches in the four other groups between the runner-up and the bottom-placed team were declared null and void based on Article 16.1 and Appendix 2 of the tournament regulations.

As a result, Laos and Turkmenistan advanced as the two best runners-up. Laos emerged as the best of the second-placed teams with four points.

Turkmenistan, who also finished as AFC Challenge Cup runners-up in 2010, took the second ticket to the Maldives, with their superior goal difference separating them from 2008 champions India, Bangladesh and inaugural winners Tajikistan, who all finished with three points.



Saudi, Iraq Advance To U-14s Finals

Saudi Arabia and Iraq secured their berths in the finals of next year's AFC U-14 Championships as both nations topped their respective qualifying groups during March.

With only one place available in the finals for each regional group, the Saudis became the first nation to secure their ticket for the decisive phase of the competition when they defeated Yemen 3-0 in their penultimate match.

Goals from Almas Naif Musa, Abdulrahman Mohammed and Fie Ali Alubaker sealed the win for the Saudis and ensured neither Yemen or Qatar could leapfrog above them in the Group B standings.

Yemen finished in second place in the table with Qatar third and Kuwait in fourth place.

Iraq, meanwhile, progressed as winners of Group A after handing the United Arab Emirates a 5-0 defeat in the Omani capital Muscat.

Layth Alla Hassoon Al-Jashaami, Mohammed Ridha Jalil Mezher Al Elayawi, Ali Kadhim Dawood, Ahmed Swadi Gatea Almroze and Saif Husham Waham were all on target for the Iraqis as they guaranteed themselves of finishing ahead of second placed Syria.

The remaining qualifiers for the newly created tournament will be played during April and May, with the finals to be held in 2014.

Group A									
	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts	
Iraq	5	5	0	0	17	1	16	15	
Syria	5	4	0	1	8	5	3	12	
Oman	5	3	0	2	6	7	-1	9	
UAE	5	1	1	3	2	8	-6	4	
Bahrain	5	1	0	4	3	9	-6	3	
Lebanon	5	0	1	4	3	9	-6	1	

02-03-13	Lebanon 1 Oman 3 HT: 1-2
03-04-13	Syria 1 United Arab Emirates 0 HT: 0-0
03-04-13	Bahrain 0 Iraq 4 HT: 0-2
03-03-13	Bahrain 0 Syria 2 HT: 0-1
04-04-13	Oman 0 Iraq 3 HT: 0-1
05-03-13	Lebanon 1 United Arab Emirates 1 HT: 0-1
05-03-13	United Arab Emirates 1 Bahrain 0 HT: 1-0
06-04-13	Iraq 1 Lebanon 0 HT: 0-0
06-04-13	Oman 1 Syria 3 HT: 1-0
07-03-13	Syria 1 Iraq 4 HT: 0-3
07-03-13	United Arab Emirates 0 Oman 1 HT: 0-0
08-03-13	Bahrain 3 Lebanon 1 HT: 2-0
08-03-13	Iraq 5 United Arab Emirates 0 HT: 2-0
09-04-13	Lebanon 0 Syria 1 HT: 0-0
09-04-13	Oman 1 Bahrain 0 HT: 1-0

Group B									
	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts	
Saudi Arabia	5	3	2	0	14	3	11	11	
Yemen	5	2	2	1	6	4	2	8	
Qatar	5	1	4	0	7	3	4	7	
Kuwait	5	1	2	2	3	4	-1	5	
Jordan	5	0	4	1	1	2	-1	4	
Palestine	5	0	2	3	2	17	-15	2	

26-02-13	Kuwait 0 Saudi Arabia 1 HT: 0-1
27-02-13	Jordan 0 Yemen 0
27-02-13	Qatar 5 Palestine 1 HT: 5-0
27-02-13	Saudi Arabia 7 Palestine 0 HT: 3-0
28-02-13	Qatar 0 Jordan 0
01-03-13	Kuwait 1 Yemen 2 HT: 1-1
01-03-13	Palestine 1 Kuwait 1 HT: 1-1
02-03-13	Saudi Arabia 1 Jordan 1 HT: 1-0
03-03-13	Yemen 0 Qatar 0
03-03-13	Jordan 0 Palestine 0
04-03-13	Yemen 0 Palestine 3 HT: 0-1
04-03-13	Qatar 0 Kuwait 0
04-03-13	Palestine 0 Yemen 4 HT: 0-3
05-03-13	Kuwait 1 Jordan 0 HT: 0-0
05-03-13	Saudi Arabia 2 Qatar 2 HT: 2-1

Group C									
02-04-13	Tajikistan v Afghanistan	•	Bhutan v Maldives						
03-04-13	Bhutan v Tajikistan	•	Nepal v Maldives						
05-04-13	Afghanistan v Bhutan	•	Nepal v Tajikistan						
07-04-13	Tajikistan v Maldives	•	Afghanistan v Nepal						
08-04-13	Maldives v Afghanistan	•	Nepal v Bhutan						

Group D									
23-04-13	Turkmenistan v Kyrgyzstan	•	Pakistan v Sri Lanka	•					
24-04-13	India v IR Iran								
24-04-13	Pakistan v Turkmenistan	•	India v Kyrgyzstan	•					
25-04-13	IR Iran v Sri Lanka								
26-04-13	Sri Lanka v India	•	Kyrgyzstan v Pakistan	•					
26-04-13	IR Iran v Turkmenistan								
26-04-13	Turkmenistan v Sri Lanka	•	Pakistan v India	•					
26-04-13	Kyrgyzstan v IR Iran								
29-04-13	India v Turkmenistan	•	Sri Lanka v Kyrgyzstan	•					
29-04-13	IR Iran v Pakistan								



Group E									
28-05-13	Vietnam v Timor Leste	•	Brunei v Darussalam	•					
28-05-13	Philippines v Malaysia	•	Myanmar v Philippines						
28-05-13	Brunei Darussalam v Vietnam	•	Malaysia v Timor Leste	•					
31-05-13	Philippines v Malaysia	•	Timor Leste v Brunei Darussalam	•					
01-06-13	Timor Leste v Myanmar	•	Vietnam v Philippines						
01-06-13	Brunei Darussalam v Malaysia								
01-06-13	Philippines v Timor Leste	•	Malaysia v Vietnam	•					
01-06-13	Myanmar v Brunei Darussalam								

Group F									
28-05-13	Indonesia v Thailand	•	Bangladesh v Cambodia	•					
03-04-13	Laos v Singapore								
29-05-13	Indonesia v Cambodia	•	Laos v Bangladesh						
31-05-13	Thailand v Singapore								
31-05-13	Thailand v Bangladesh	•	Singapore v Indonesia						
02-06-13	Cambodia v Laos								
02-06-13	Bangladesh v Singapore	•	Cambodia v Thailand						
03-06-13	Laos v Indonesia								
03-06-13	Singapore v Cambodia	•	Thailand v Laos	•					
03-06-13	Indonesia v Bangladesh								

Group G									
20-04-13	Korea Republic v Northern Mariana	•	Guam v Chinese Taipei						
21-04-13	Chinese Taipei v China PR	•	Guam v Korea Republic						
23-04-13	China PR v Guam	•	Northern Mariana v Chinese Taipei						
25-04-13	Northern Mariana v Guam	•	Korea Republic v China PR						
26-04-13	Chinese Taipei v Korea Republic	•	China PR v Northern Mariana						

Group H									
11-04-13	DPR Korea v Hong Kong	•	DPR Korea v Hong Kong	•					
12-04-13	Japan v Macau								
12-04-13	Macau v Mongolia	•	Japan v DPR Korea						
14-04-13	Mongolia v Japan	•	Hong Kong v Macau						
16-04-13	Hong Kong v Japan	•	DPR Korea v Mongolia						
17-04-13	Macau v DPR Korea	•	Mongolia v Hong Kong						
12-04-13	Japan v Macau								
12-04-13	Macau v Mongolia	•	Japan v DPR Korea						
14-04-13	Mongolia v Japan	•	Hong Kong v Macau						
16-04-13	Hong Kong v Japan	•	DPR Korea v Mongolia						
17-04-13	Macau v DPR Korea	•	Mongolia v Hong Kong						

Focus On ACL Stability

In a bid to bring stability to the AFC Champions League and widen its base to more Member Associations, the AFC Adhoc Committee for Professional Football and the AFC Competitions Committee have decided to include the top 23 countries in the continent's flagship club competition from 2014 to 2016.

At present, clubs from only 10 countries who meet the AFC Champions League participating criteria, play in the competition.

The interested Member Associations, within the top 23 as per the AFC rankings, can apply either for a direct slot or a play-off berth in the competition.

Each interested Member Association/League/Club will be given points for each item of AFC Champions League criteria and the Member Associations will then be ranked according to the number of points collected and the slots will be distributed as per the criteria. Only MAs with a minimum of 800 points will be granted direct slots in the group stage of the competition.

The top five Member Associations in both the East



and West zones as per the points ranking will receive direct slots in the group stage of the competition while the remaining Member Associations will receive play-off slots if they meet the minimum requirements.

A total of 14 direct slots will be given to the top five Member Associations in each zone and the remaining four slots (two in each zone) will be filled through play-offs.

The AFC Cup champions and the runners-up will be given a play-off slot in the AFC Champions League regardless of their respective Member Associations rank as long as the club meets the minimum criteria.

The committee also approved a single match format for the AFC Champions League final for the next three years starting in 2014.



AFC & DFB Renew Partnership



AFC Acting President Zhang Jilong and German Football Association President Wolfgang Niersbach signed a Memorandum of Understanding in Kuala Lumpur at the end of February to intensify and continue the partnership between the two bodies.

Under the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), the German Football Association (DFB) will invite coaches appointed by the AFC to their international coaching courses for foreign coaches, while also offering assistance with coaching and technical development as well as sending experts for courses or seminars organised by the AFC as well as by Member Associations.

"Asian football is on the rise but we need the latest knowhow to get where we want to. I believe this agreement will help us achieve our goals. It will provide us with technical support, which could bridge any existing gap," said AFC Acting President Zhang.

"What is really good about this arrangement is that the DFB will be making available their experts directly to our Member Associations. I am sure our Member Associations will be eager to avail of this particular benefit."

Both the bodies will also exchange information on football management and development, including coaching and mentoring programmes, grassroots and youth development, marketing, media and information technology.

"We are thankful to AFC for their support to German football in the past and I hope after the signing this MoU, it will continue as we share the same organisational philosophy," said Niersbach.

New Era For Palestinian Coaching

Palestinian football coaching marked a new milestone in March as the nation's first AFC 'B' Coaching Certificate Course took place with 28 national coaches in attendance.

The Palestine Football Association's Head of Competitions, Salah Al Jabari, welcomed the participants during the course's opening ceremony on behalf of President Jibril Al Rajoub, Technical Manager Dr. Mazen Khatib, General Secretary of the sub-federation in the South Saleh Syed Ahmed and course coordinator Alaa Haloub.

"This course is held for the first time in Palestine and will contribute effectively to the development of Palestinian football, and I hope everyone will do his best for the success of this course," said Ahmed.

Dr. Khatib, meanwhile, thanked the AFC for its response to Palestine's need for more coaching courses, adding that this year will be special as it is the AFC Grassroots Year.



Progress Of 'Kick Off' Reviewed

The AFC Vision Asia Committee has approved the application of Chinese Taipei to join the confederation's development programme - Kick Off.

The committee, which met under the chairmanship of Malaysia's HRH Prince Abdullah Ibtisam Sultan Ahmad Shah in March, also discussed the roadmap of the programme and were informed on the progress of the project.

"We have made some progress in implementation of this programme as this is aimed at reaching out to less developed

footballing countries," said HRH Prince Abdullah.

"We have started implementing this programme in 12 countries and I am happy to note that we have made tremendous progress.

"I would like the success stories of this programme should be highlighted and emulated in other countries. We have good collaboration with FIFA, UEFA and FIFPro and I hope to further enhance our understanding and cooperation with these organisations."



ACL Participation Updates

Representatives of Member Associations and leagues attended a briefing at AFC House in March to receive the latest updates on the points system and decision method for AFC Champions League participation.

Some of the updates discussed during the briefing were the synchronisation of the AFC Champions League Criteria and Club Licensing Criteria, AFC Champions League points re-distribution, factors affecting decision methods and others.

"The objective of the briefing is to give you the latest info or updates, clarifications, explanations and sharing of

experience among the leagues and MAs especially those thinking of joining the ACL or those still not clear about the ACL participation criteria," said AFC Executive Director Windsor John.

"However, in our zeal to promote our elite clubs' participation in the continent's premier club championship, let's not forget about the overall picture which is development, where clubs are playing an important role.

"The most important thing we want to impress is that to develop clubs means to develop football. If the clubs develop, football develops."



India To Host 2015 AFC Medical Conference



The AFC Medical Committee, which met in March under the chairmanship of Dato' Dr. Gurcharan Singh from Malaysia, awarded the hosting rights of the 5th AFC Conference on Science and Football Medicine 2015 to India.

The members agreed to introduce the AFC Meritorious Award for Football Medicine that will be bestowed during the conference. The award is open to doctors, physiotherapists and allied health professionals that have rendered longstanding professional assistance and scientific research towards the development of football and football medicine in particular.

"Myanmar and Sri Lanka have embraced the 'Football for Health' programme and other countries have also shown their interest. We will actively implement this programme in the next few years in other countries," said Dato' Dr. Gurcharan Singh.

"I am happy to note that AFC is setting new standards in medical education and healthcare of players."



Pakistan To Embrace Grassroots Year

The Pakistan Football Federation will mobilise 70 grassroots coaches throughout the country to organise a football festival in conjunction with the AFC Grassroots year 2013 and AFC Grassroots Day.

The AFC Grassroots year is encouraging Member Associations to organise activities to promote and emphasise that football is accessible and socially beneficial to everyone and that a strong foundation will allow players to progress to the elite level.

AFC Grassroots Day, which falls on May 15 and coincides with the International Family Day, will be celebrated throughout the week or at other times suitable for the Member Associations.

"A systematic promotion of grassroots football has always been one of the AFC and FIFA's priorities that the PFF is supporting," said Pakistan Football Federation General Secretary Lt. Col. (Rtd) Ahmed Yar Khan Lodhi.

"The PFF is very keen to improve the standards of the grassroots programme as it will help to create a large talented pool for the PFF Youth Development Programme."

Seminar To Mark AFC Grassroots Day

A three-day seminar on grassroots football will mark the AFC Grassroots Day in May 2013.

The AFC Grassroots Day 2013 will be celebrated on May 15 and the seminar will be held in Kuala Lumpur and will be attended by grassroots heads from the AFC Member Associations.

To further promote and propagate grassroots football, the AFC will organise Grassroots Football Instructors' Courses in the regions of AFC with FIFA's co-operation. Participants in these courses, who must have at least the AFC 'B' coaching certificate, will be trained how to deliver grassroots courses. They will then be expected to apply the newly-gained experience and information in their

respective countries.

The AFC will also assist Member Associations who need to develop their own Grassroots Framework Policy to guide them to sustainable grassroots football development initiatives.



SALT LAKE STADIUM

Kolkata, India

The multi-purpose Salt Lake Stadium in Kolkata was built in 1984 and is the largest in India and the second largest in the world with an official capacity of 120,000.

Owned by the Indian Football Association and installed with an Astroturf playing surface, the stadium is primarily used for football and is the home of I-League clubs East Bengal, Mohun Bagan, Pailan Arrows and Prayag United.

One of the most regular and colourful fixtures which takes place at the venue is the Kolkata derby between East Bengal and Mohun Bagan. In 1997, a reported crowd of 130,000 fans attend the boro (which means Big in Bengali) at Salt Lake Stadium and saw Baichung Bhutia score a hat-trick as East Bengal beat Mohun Bagan 4-1 in the semi-finals of the Federation Cup.

The venue regularly hosts international football matches, as well as athletics and concerts.

The 1987 multi-sport South Asian Games were held at the venue and Mohammed Fareed scored an 89th minute winner as India edged out Nepal 1-0 in front of a crowd of 80,000 to win the gold medal in the football competition.

Yuba Bharati Krirangan, as it is known in Bengali, hosted a farewell match for former Germany goalkeeper Oliver Kahn in May 2008 before being renovated in 2011 ahead of an international friendly between Argentina and Venezuela.



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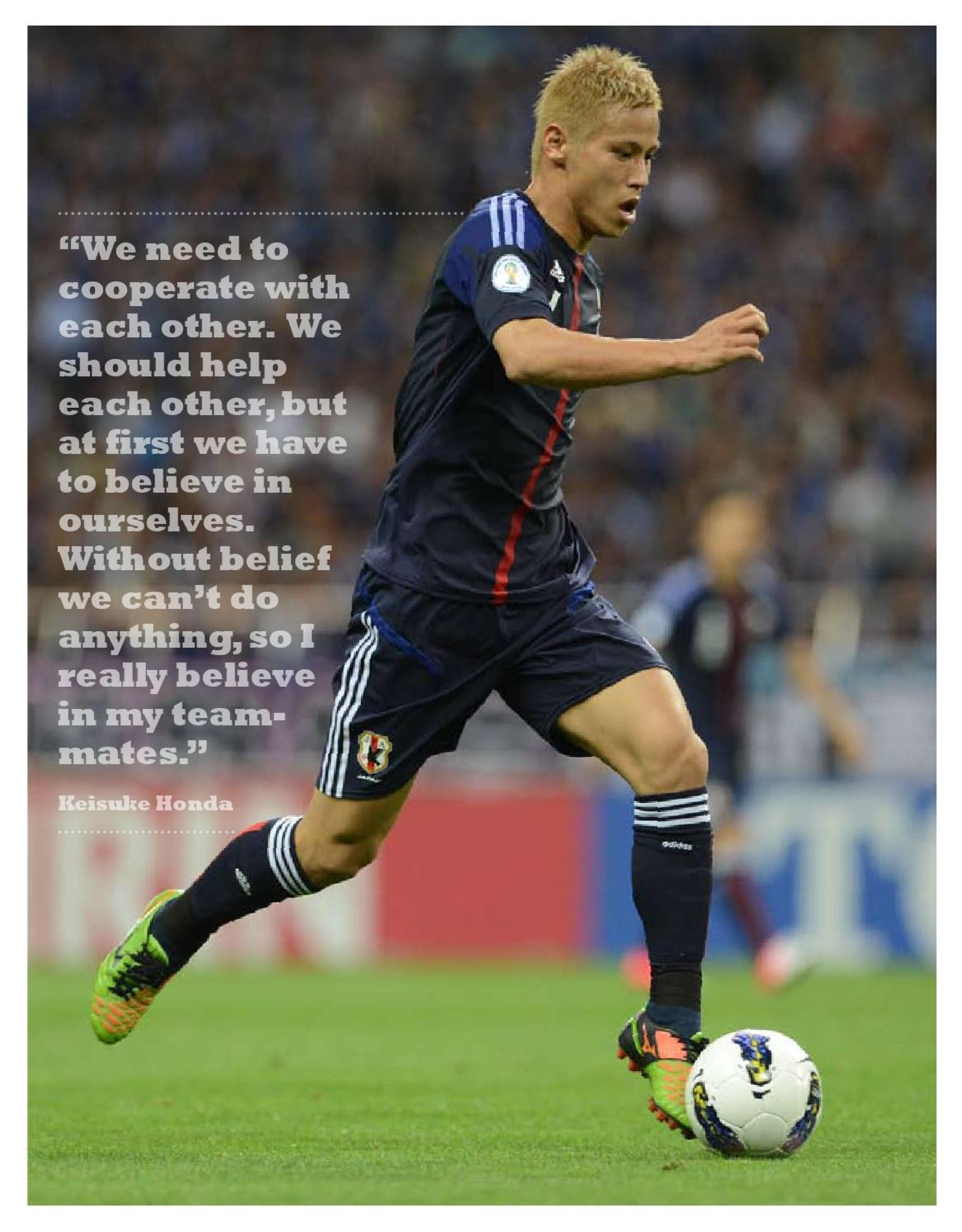


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“We need to cooperate with each other. We should help each other, but at first we have to believe in ourselves. Without belief we can’t do anything, so I really believe in my teammates.”

Keisuke Honda